

*She's willing to do anything
to follow her plan.*

At her Fingertips



— THE CHRONICLES OF —
ALICE & IVY

BOOK THREE

KELLYN ROTH

At Her

Fingertips

Published by Kellyn Roth, Author

Wild Blue Wonder Press

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For my three story-swapping, truth-or-dare-playing, Hank-the-Cowdog-loving, Bone-Disease-carrying friends—Sonja, Sofie, and Eva. Y'all would make terrible nurses. Also, I apologize for Kirk. Thank you for giving me Ruby, who gave me Peter, who gave me Alice. Without you, this just wouldn't have been possible.

Character List

Alice Knight — a young lady on the verge of her debut who has a plan.

Ivy Knight — her twin sister.

Mrs. Claire Knight — Alice's mother. Mistress of Pearlbelles Park, an estate near the village of Creling in Kent.

Mr. Philip Knight — Owner of Pearlbelles Park, Claire's husband, and Alice's father.

Edmond "Ned" Knight — Mr. Knight's son

from his former marriage.

Caleb, John “Jackie,” and Rebecca Knight — Mr. and Mrs. Knight’s younger children.

Nettie Jameson — Claire’s former maid & Alice and Ivy’s former caretaker who now lives in the gatehouse at Pearlbelleville Park with her family.

Tom, Malcolm, Elinor “Ella,” and Deborah “Debby” Jameson — Nettie’s husband and children.

Miss Fletcher — keeps the little boys and girls at Pearlbelleville Park well-taught.

Anna — a long-suffering nanny.

Kirk Manning — A former stable boy at Pearlbellevue Park who now trains horses.

Lady Mary Cassidy “Cassie” O’Connell — Alice’s dearest friend and fellow former student of Miss Selle’s Boarding School for Girls.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Chattoway (Uncle Charlie and Aunt Lois) — Alice’s maternal uncle and his wife, who also happens to be Mr. Knight’s cousin, formerly known as Lois Elton.

Geoffrey Chattoway — their young son.

Posy Parker — Mr. Steven Parker's daughter, who lives with Uncle Charlie and Aunt Lois due to her father's lack of interest in her well-being.

Mr. Steven Parker — First cousin of Mr. Knight and overall horrible person.

Peter Strauss — an American reporter.

Gibson Ashfield — only son of the wealthy Ashfield family.

Aubrey Montgomery — yet another man of
wealth and influence.

“Except the Lord build the house, they labour
in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the
city, the watchman waketh but in vain. It is
vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to
eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his
beloved sleep.”

~Psalm 127:1-2~

Chapter One

February 1880

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Peter Strauss tossed three shirts, half a dozen socks, and two waistcoats on the bed. “Mama, I wish you’d learn to take my decisions as final.”

His mother stood with her arms folded across her chest and her foot tapping restlessly on the rag rug on his bedroom floor. “I do take your decisions as final—but that doesn’t mean I have to agree with them.”

He huffed but made no response. That

was just the thing—more than her accepting his decision, he wanted her to agree with him. He wanted her to *support* him in his decision.

However, his mother—straightforward and opinionated and at times exuberantly emotional—would never understand that. Peter loved her with everything he had in his heart. She was the second greatest presence in his life, right after God. However, her wheedling never had that much of an effect on him.

“I’ll do nothing but worry the whole time you’re gone.” She crossed the room, grabbed one of his shirts, and folded it with a vengeance. “My dear, my darling, my fortune, you are not meant to be away from home!

Think how much you'll want us. Your church is here, and—"

"Mother, I'm not entirely incapable of functioning on my own." He would be twenty-seven this coming October, and, yes, he still lived with his family—he had since he graduated college five years ago. That was because he couldn't imagine a better place for a man to be than with those who loved him best.

It was also because he couldn't afford such a nice writing space on his salary as a reporter. Here, he got to live in the outskirts of the city on a nice street with a pretty little garden behind the house. Otherwise, he'd be confined to a small apartment in the heart of

noisy Philadelphia. That wouldn't do; he'd never get anything done.

Mama tucked the first of his shirts into his trunk. "I doubt you'll remember to eat. Oh, and, darling, you know you get seasick!"

"I think just the first few days will be bad." Peter turned from her to dig through his drawers—and what would he need for this little adventure? Nicer clothes than he had, probably. "It's only a few weeks. After that I'll be in England, which, though an island, isn't exactly afloat."

His mother chuckled behind him, a pleasant sound to his ears. "I know, Peter. I know. But I've got to fuss because heaven knows you won't! You're not reckless, no, but

you are forgetful. Besides ...” He heard her approach from behind. “I can’t help but feel that you’re running away from your troubles.”

Peter cleared his throat and moved away from his dresser drawers. “You’ll know better than me what to pack.”

Mama sighed and took his place. “You just sidestepped around my question.”

He cocked his head. “It wasn’t a question.”

She tsked. “Whoever was it that raised such a stubborn child? You get that from your father, young man.”

He rolled his eyes and sat on the edge of the bed. His mother was conceivably the most stubborn woman of his acquaintance. “I

get that from you, and I got a much smaller amount than Andrew or Caroline both. And I'm not running from my troubles!"

She turned, hands on her hips. "What do you call it, then?"

"I'm going to England on a newspaper assignment from my editor." Peter stood and eased around her to the trunk. "Which reminds me that I need to pack as many pencils as I can carry. Do you think—"

"That's the reason you're going to England, but that's not the reason you're leaving this house, leaving Philadelphia, and I know it." Mama's voice was getting firmer with every moment, but Peter didn't want to fight with her. He wanted to have a peaceful

relationship with his mother.

He just didn't want to address that particular issue yet. "It made sense for me to go now. I have a connection with that fellow in London—"

"Oh, the boy you helped?"

Peter chuckled. "You're not old enough to call every man a boy, Mama. He's only a few years younger than me. His name is Gibson Ashfield, and he finds me amusing." That sense of amusement allowed Peter to travel to London, stay at the Ashfield home there, and observe high society for the benefit of his newspaper.

"Don't you let that boy end you back to me with those Old World airs your aunt has

perfected.” Mama returned to the packing. He could almost hear his trousers snap with her frustration as she folded them. His mother was overprotective, especially as of late. With Riley ... and with Maddie ... and now baby Polly ...

Oh, it was a fine mess. And as far as his mother was concerned, this mess was not going away without her help.

Thankfully, Peter was a little more than six years old. He didn’t need his mother to help him with his emotional troubles. He just needed God.

“You know.” He straightened. “I think I’ll go take a quick walk.” If Peter was lucky, it’d be a quick, quiet walk, and he could have

a serious talk with God about his own feelings and what problems they were causing him.

“Oh, all right. I’d better finish here, anyway.” Her small body half-disappeared into his trunk as she knelt down to gather up and reorganize his tossed-in clothing.

Good. She was distracted, though not for long. Otherwise she would have insisted on continuing the conversation.

It was a warm spring day, and Peter had to smile at the blue sky above, the budding trees lining the road, and the flowers peeping out of the beds of his neighbors.

“Penn! Penn!” A joyous voice rang down the street from behind Peter. “I was just coming to see you.”

Peter sighed but smiled as he turned to face Riley Farjon, the only person who regularly used his childhood nickname—a shortening of “Pennsylvania.” Wonderful. Riley would only add stress to Peter’s mind. However, Peter also enjoyed the happy boisterousness of his best friend and cousin’s tone. “Hello. Coming to see me?”

“Yes, indeed.” Riley jogged up beside him. “Nice day, isn’t it? But never mind the small talk.” His Virginian accent dragged out every vowel to a ridiculous level, but he also emphasized it for Peter’s benefit.

Given Riley’s proclivity for imitating the accent of everyone he met, to the point where people regularly mistook him for

different nationalities, Peter wasn't even sure to what degree Riley used his father's drawl naturally. His other cousins certainly spoke with more of a New England accent.

"We haven't had any small talk," Peter protested.

"Never mind it. You're heading to England soon, Penn?" Riley slapped his shoulder, not entirely unlike the way Papa had slapped Riley's back after Polly was born.

Was traveling to England a 'you're a father now, son' level of accomplishment? Heavens, Peter hoped not. He wasn't ready for that.

"Yes, this Tuesday."

"All right. You can't go." Riley set his

feet slightly wider than shoulder width apart and folded his arms across his chest. “That’s final.”

An incredulous laugh bubbled up from Peter’s chest. “You’re not in charge of me.” Strangely enough, that was not the first time Peter had had to say that to Riley. He’d said it so many times that he’d lost track of the frequency. He’d been saying it since he was seven years old, actually.

Sometimes he ended up giving in and admitting Riley *was* in charge after all. But now Riley couldn’t just beat him into a pulp if he said *no*.

... *right?*

“You have an obligation to me. You

stood before God and man and made an obligation to me.” He tapped Peter’s chest authoritatively.

Peter allowed his stance to loosen. “I don’t remember marrying you.” Riley was just about the only one he could be sarcastic with. Otherwise, he felt bad—someone might take him seriously or think he was insane or any number of things.

Riley? It didn’t matter. Nothing really did. Peter could drag Riley out of a bar and dunk his head in a barrel of water and lecture him for an hour, and in the morning, it’d be the same as it always had been. In the same vein, Riley could call Peter out for a lapse in logic or an argument more based on emotion

than thought, and they could fight it out, and again they would still be friends.

Riley chuckled, though it was more acknowledgement than humor. “No, but you are my child’s godfather. Someone needs to stay and be the responsible one. Do you really expect me to keep care of a baby by myself?”

“You’re not ‘by yourself,’ Riley.” Peter rolled his eyes. “Remember who you *did* marry?” In spite of Peter’s protestations, no less.

“I know, but Maddie’s the mother, and someone’s got to keep me standing beside her.” Riley’s mask slipped for a second, and Peter saw the little boy again. His best friend, who had never known the love or respect of

his own father, who everyone doubted, who rebelled to rebel.

But, in Peter's mind, no incomplete story deserved judgment. He didn't want people pulling out his first drafts and squinting at the overabundant commas, after all. He could offer no less in terms of compassion to others.

“How would I be any more of an expert?” Peter said, instead of addressing any number of fallacies in Riley's argument. The primary one being that Riley was a changed man, a follower of God, and of course he could do anything through Christ. Including being a father, no matter how difficult the path was to tread.

“You’re like those women born with a mother instinct.” Riley shrugged. “You were born reading children’s bedtime stories and being patient. I can’t explain it, Penn—it just is true.”

Peter shook his head. Yes, Riley didn’t know the first thing about raising a baby—but though Peter might be able to keep a child entertained for an hour or comfort them when they were sad, that was a tiny action in the grand scope of fatherhood.

Even Peter wasn’t sure he could do that. Being a father required a lot more than stealing someone’s baby to cuddle. It took the consistent devotion of years to raise a man or woman and send them out into the world.

“My father has more experience than I do,” Peter said after a long silence. “Ask him your questions, not me. I wouldn’t know where to begin, but I think Papa’s everything he ought to be. And you *love* Polly—that’s got to go a long way, too.”

Riley grunted. “Of course I love her. She’s a little baby doll. But someday she’s going to be a young woman, and then I’ll need you—”

Peter raised his eyebrows. “You think Polly’s going to become a young woman before I get back from England? I’m going for six months, not sixteen years.”

Riley held his arms up. “I don’t know how fast the little things grow! Anyway, there

might be more little ones. You know, the hideous other gender.” He winced. “Can you imagine me trying to raise a boy? Look how I turned out!”

“You and Maddie are planning on having another baby in six months?” Peter shrugged. “Now, Riley, I hate to tell you this, but it takes a little longer—”

Riley scowled, though there was a bit of amusement in his eyes. “Why are you like this today?”

Because he felt utterly miserable inside and he was taking it out on his friend? Peter coughed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be that way. I’m sure you’ll be fine for six months while I’m in England.”

Riley's posture relaxed a bit. "I know. I know it! But here's what I'm thinking." He turned to face Peter again, this time standing in the middle of the sidewalk so neither of them could move forward. "You're acting, Penn. Acting like you're doing fine—acting like your life is exactly what you want it to be. Pardon me, but you're not a good actor! You see that people are worried about you, and you're running away from both your pain and theirs. I wouldn't change a thing about my own life—I'd be lying if I said I would. But that doesn't change the fact that your response to this is to run and to put on this blasted act."

"All the world's a stage," Peter quoted through set teeth.

“Right. But you’re treating your close relationships like a stage—the closest relationships you’ll ever have. It hurts those around you.”

“Exactly.” Because it hurt those around him, Peter wasn’t willing to stay and let that hurt continue. “I’ll come back from England with a fresh perspective. I’m sure I will. In the meantime, we’ll not speak of it.” Speaking of it didn’t help, not really. It just perpetuated the ongoing cycle in his thoughts—his love, the lack of honor in that love, the guilt over that lack of honor in that love, the pain in the guilt over the lack of honor in his love, but despite it all ... his love.

“I’d just thought you were getting

better, too.” Riley cursed under his breath.

“Riley!”

“I know! But if there’s anything worth using strong language over, this is it, Penn, because it’s not fair to you or to me or to Maddie.”

Peter stilled. He felt that he could take anything but that. “Maddie doesn’t know, does she?”

Riley shrugged. “She doesn’t understand your distance. She’s sad that your friendship isn’t as close as it used to be. And since I thought it was almost over, I didn’t understand it either. I thought you were going to fight this, Penn—you told me you were going to fight it.”

“I have! I am.” Every day for the past two years, faithfully. He’d made strides, won battles, but he’d not won the war yet.

“Then why haven’t you beaten it? It’s got you running now. I never thought I’d see you run.” Again, the vulnerability in Riley’s eyes—Peter was the infallible hero, the man who proved his words with his actions.

Peter wanted to be the man Riley thought he was. But that wasn’t possible right now. He was human—the simple act of going to war didn’t mean he’d win, spiritually or in any other area.

Riley would have to come to terms with the reality of human nature and how it struggled and writhed even when the owner of

that human nature belonged to Christ. Peter would have to keep fighting even when it seemed better to just say, ‘I’ll never beat this, so I’m going to give up and pine for her forever.’ That type of thing might make good story fodder, but it wasn’t passable in real life.

“It’s better,” he said at last, softly. “It’s a lot better. I just need a bit of distance. Polly is ... Polly is wonderful, and I was honored that you made me her godfather. But seeing her showed me some battles I hadn’t known I needed to fight. I just think I can do that a lot better away from the pity of my family.”

Riley hesitated, then nodded. “I can see that.”

“Yes. So, Riley, please. Just let me go in

peace. I'll come back stronger for it." Or if he didn't, he would come back with fresh resolve. It was no joking matter to be in love with your best friend's wife. Though now it wasn't so much being in love with her that bothered Peter—he wasn't quite sure he was anymore, and at any rate, he never gave it much thought—but the constant streams of *what ifs*.

The *what ifs* might be the death of him yet.

"Very well." Riley sighed and stepped to the side. "I don't like to see you unhappy, and that's the root of it. But I've always appreciated your honesty. I would respect you a lot less if you'd tried to hide it. Instead, you did the straight thing and told me how you

felt and what you'd do to keep a grasp on those feelings. I'll never forget that you did that when it would've been easier to keep your mouth shut and make-believe. It's allowed me to tug Maddie back when she decides she wants to be best friends with you with all her over-exuberant affection—I never would have thought on my own that it'd make a difference.”

“It does.” Riley was Peter’s greatest ally in this, and the only one he’d confessed this to willingly. After all, Riley understood having flaws better than anyone, and he understood how feelings grasped and tangled with reality. Besides, Riley had more to lose from Peter’s feelings than even Peter did. “Thank you,

Riley. You don't know all you do on that score just by being ... by being Maddie's husband."

Riley nodded, a slightly pained expression on his face. "I know, Penn. I know."

Chapter Two

March 6, 1880

Pearlbelle Park

Kent, England

Alice Knight drew Athena to a halt at the top of the hill and leaned back on the saddle to wipe away the moisture gathering in the corners of her eyes. The harsh spring wind caused her to fear losing her hat.

“It’s not raining at least.” She leaned forward to pat her mare’s neck. “And we both needed the run.”

Athena shook her head and made a ‘brr’

sound with her lips, chewing at the bit impatiently.

Alice laughed. “I can tell you’re as eager to run as I am, but I promised Kirk we’d wait for him. I got an earlier start than I planned.” She hadn’t been able to sleep much lately; too many thoughts swirled in her mind to quite allow it.

Athena made no response, and Alice sighed. She’d have to find Kirk soon. As it was, she was a crazy woman talking to her horse.

“Let’s ride down to the gatehouse and visit with Nettie and her children.”

Athena started down the hill toward the gates at a slight movement. The wind tore at Alice’s face once again, but she laughed into

it. The freedom of the blustering wind called her as nothing else did, and she felt compelled to enjoy the rush. At least her hat stayed in place, her hair still tucked up in a loose bun.

The ivy-covered gatehouse where Nettie and her family lived stood at the end of the drive leading to the manor of Pearlbelleville Park. A neat little garden lay behind the building, and a set of steps led up to the living quarters at the side.

Alice always felt a rush of contentment, of coming home, when she approached this building. It was inexplicable, but she gave in to the familiar tug and ran into its comforting arms.

Alice dismounted and left Athena

grazing on a short line. The kitchen door was unlocked, and she proceeded in without knocking.

Young Malcolm Jameson was bent over a schoolbook at the table. He looked up, a grin widening his chubby, tan cheeks, and his gray eyes sparkled in a familiar way. “Hullo, Alice.”

“Hullo, Malcolm.” Alice reached out to hug him. He drew back with a frown, so she opted for a handshake. She had enough little brothers to understand that sometimes physical affection simply wasn’t acceptable to little boys. “Where’s your mother?”

Malcolm leaned back and stretched his arms out, no doubt the same way his father did after hunching over something. “She’s

upstairs. Debby has a stomachache, and Mama is trying to get her to take a nap.”

“Oh dear.” Alice slid off her gloves and dropped them on the table, feeling sorry for Nettie. Debby was a fussy child. Hopefully it was just her usual complaints, which lasted as long as her bad mood did. “I’ll go see her and then come back to help you with your history lesson until my friend arrives. I’m not good at it myself, but I’m sure I know something you don’t.”

“Perhaps.” Malcolm’s tone didn’t convey conviction. Alice had allowed the Jameson children to think of her as an older sister, and little siblings seldom fully respected older siblings. They knew them too well.

Alice just laughed and turned toward the stairs. Going up, she met Malcolm's younger sister, Ella, her curls tied back in a messy plait. *Nettie must be having a difficult morning, or Ella would be spotless.* Nettie, Alice's former governess, took great pride in keeping her children neat from head to toe. Alice should know; she'd been the primary focus of Nettie's ministrations for many years.

"Good morning, Alice," Ella said with a serene smile.

Alice squeezed the girl's shoulder affectionately. Her own siblings had never developed manners to equal Ella's, and it was never more apparent than when she greeted guests with a friendly yet polite manner.

“Good morning, Miss Ella. How’s Debby?”

“Much better, I think. It’s good to see you here.” Ella gestured toward the kitchen, her poise—in those rare and inconsistent moments that she chose to adapt any sort of order—that which Alice could only aspire to.

Though Alice had been told she had a bit of natural poise. Just not as much as Ella, a six-year-old, apparently. Oh well. If she knew one thing about life, and she didn’t know many things, it was that one couldn’t win all the races one entered in.

“Thank you, dearest. I just want to speak with your mother for a moment. Run down and tell me if you see Kirk coming, won’t you? I’m sure he’ll stop when he sees

Athena.”

Ella nodded and dashed off before Alice could say anything further.

Alice proceeded to a bedroom at the top of the stairs. She eased the door open so as not to disturb the invalid.

Nettie sat on the edge of three-year-old Debby's bed. Debby had a fretful, restless expression on her face, but it lightened somewhat when she saw Alice.

Nettie glanced over her shoulder, a soft smile lighting up her countenance. “I thought I heard you coming up the stairs, Gracie.” The childhood nickname, strange as Alice now considered it, was also worth a smile.

“I stopped to talk to Malcolm and Ella a

bit.” Alice gave Debby a sympathetic look. “I heard you aren’t feeling well, pet.”

The little girl scowled and shook her head.

Alice put her hands on her hips. “Now, Debby, don’t pout. You’ll be better soon! Your mother knows how to take care of sick little girls. She always took care of me when I was your age.”

Debby turned her eyes on her mother and cocked her head. Like the other two Jameson children, she had her mother’s eyes and ringlets, though her hair was a shade lighter than Nettie’s.

“Yes, I did.” Nettie returned her gaze to her daughter. “Now, you must close your

eyes.”

A stubborn little chin jerked up. “I won’t nap!”

“I don’t care if you sleep or not, but if I catch you with your eyes open ...” Her voice trailed off in an unspoken threat Alice remembered well from her childhood.

Nettie was still Alice’s chief advisor. There was no going against her; there never had been. Alice would sooner confront her own mother. But then, Mother lacked the staying power, the stubbornness, that Alice possessed.

Nettie, though? Nettie could stand head to head with Alice for hours, and she made it clear at once that she would not be the first to

give in.

Debby snapped her eyes shut, and Nettie rose from the bed. Alice backed out of the room, and they walked down the stairs and into the kitchen together.

“Nettie, I wanted to ask you if you would come up to the house and look at a few new dresses.” She smoothed her hands over her simple green riding habit, already missing it. The dresses she would wear to her debut in London in just one short month would be a great deal less familiar. “Your taste is closer to mine than Mother’s.” Her mother knew fashion but not necessarily comfort.

“Yes, of course. Tomorrow, perhaps—or the next day, if Debby isn’t better.” Nettie

smirked. “I think she ate too many sweets at her friend’s birthday celebration, so she should be well soon.”

“Oh, I’m glad that’s all.” Alice slid onto the seat at the table across from Malcolm. “How have you been?”

In the past three months, she’d spoken those words every time she’d visited. So far Nettie hadn’t actually spoken about losing her child, as if she should protect an eighteen-year-old from such hard realities. But Alice wanted to voice her support nonetheless.

Nettie gave away no obvious emotion, but Alice thought she saw the slightest flicker of a shadow across her eyes. “I’m well.”

Oh, Nettie, you don’t have to be well for

me! But Alice knew better than to say that aloud. She wasn't much of one for voicing her grief, either. "Good." What else could she say? Alice had never lost anyone important. Not really.

Nor did she intend to. She'd keep her loved ones safe by sheer force of will, somehow. She must—every instinct in her said it was necessary.

"It's a shame you can't come when I go to London next month." Alice slid her fingers along the smooth grain of the table. "I would love to have you near. A lot is going to happen, Nettie." She slowly raised her eyes to her friend's face. "I'm a bit nervous."

Nettie, too, took a seat at the table and

regarded Alice seriously. “As well you ought to be. A young lady’s debut is important. Your mother’s often told me so.” Nettie had been Mother’s maid before Alice and her twin sister, Ivy, came along, and Alice imagined she knew as much of the upper class and their ways as her mistress had. “But we will write to each other often, and you are never far from my prayers.”

Prayers? Yes, Alice admitted to needing them. To say her debut was important seemed an understatement.

Alice knew, without a doubt, that she was essentially being put on the marriage mart. She’d begin to attend balls and dinner parties as a woman who might receive suitors,

who might marry, who might begin having children.

Alice knew that she wanted all those things. The excitement within her at the prospect was almost too much to contain.

“I hope I’ll only have the one Season.” Alice drummed her fingers along the table. “I’d like to get started young. I think that’s best—then there can be more time for children.”

Nettie raised her eyebrows. “And you think that’s all it will take—a few months? To choose a man to spend the rest of your life with?”

Alice waved away Nettie’s concerns with a flip of her hand. She didn’t just think—

she knew, ‘deep in her bones,’ if her father’s jocular saying could be used in such a situation. “Why should it take any longer? We’ll know the basics about each other already, being from the same sphere. Doubtless we’ll want the same things.”

“Oh, *doubtless.*” Nettie rose and went to the stove. “Tea?”

“No, thank you. Kirk will be here soon.” She hoped to ride up to the manor with him, alongside the carriage or even inside it, with Athena tied up behind.

Nettie returned to her chair. “Hmm. We should talk a bit more—later, if we must. I’ve realized we haven’t, and Claire is always so sparse with the information she gives.” She

cocked her head. “Gracie, you may find your Season different from what you’ve imagined.”

Alice wanted to scoff, but she politely refrained. “All right.” Of course, as far as she could see, her plan was seamless. In no time at all, she’d have a husband and a home of her own, and she’d create a beautiful family.

Nothing could possibly be better.

“Mama?” Malcolm pushed his book back slightly. “I have a question.”

Nettie smiled at her eldest affectionately. “Go ahead, son.”

“What’s a Season?”

“Oh, didn’t I mention it to you, Malcolm?” Alice leaned forward on her chair, hands clasped on top of the table. “People of

the upper class go to London after Easter every year. It's when Parliament is in session, you know, but they use it as an excuse to have grand parties and balls and all sorts of amusing things. I hope to meet my husband there."

Malcolm raised his eyebrows, so like Nettie. "What's wrong with us?"

Alice sighed heavily and made a dramatic gesture. "You're very special to me, Mal, but, sadly, you're also too young."

He scowled at her, little wrinkles appearing at the corners of his mouth. "That's not what I meant. You're like my big sister; I wouldn't marry you even if you weren't old. But I don't see why you need a husband

anyway. I think we'd all rather you just stayed here and got to be an old maid. I'd take care of you when you got to be a bent cripple, you know."

Alice and Nettie both choked with laughter.

"That's enough, Malcolm. Run to your room and finish your reading." Nettie shooed him off, then turned twinkling eyes to Alice. "At least you have one offer."

Alice wiped her eyes. "Not a very romantic one. A broken-down cottage, a cat, and some books, I'll wager. I'd die."

Nettie grinned. "I didn't realize you were a romantic."

Alice had to chuckle at the thought. It

was just like Nettie to continue teasing her about that. “I told you; I’m a realist. I don’t feel that all that falling-in-love nonsense needs to interfere with decisions that must involve a great deal of sense.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Just see what love did to my parents!”

“I suppose falling in love has been turned into a rather worldly game.” Nettie placed her hands palms up on the table. “But I do know that love is such a great gift that I could never see myself turning from it. When God offers, why refuse? And why not wait for it when you’ve the ability?”

“You didn’t have a grand romance for the ages, though, Nettie.” Alice gestured at the

simple cottage around her—sufficient, better than most former maids might aspire to, a place doubtless filled with happy memories and a scattering of painful ones, but nothing like a novel. “You might not admit it, but at the roots, Jameson was a sensible match.”

“Was he?” Nettie laughed. “I didn’t notice, for I’d sworn to never marry when I was younger than you, and I kept the promise well for many years. Then I was suddenly very much in love, and I had to open my heart to the shocking fact that God had chosen to bless me in spite of my plans.”

Alice shifted on her seat. For some reason, these simple truths made her uncomfortable. “I suppose sometimes

unexpected things happen, but I'm in a very different position than you were, Nettie."

She nodded, a pensive expression on her face. "Yes. Perhaps. But I thought you were my only chance to experience any sort of happiness on this earth. Instead, I was given a husband and children, and in Heaven I'll meet two more beautiful babies." Here her voice thickened slightly, as if even this slight admission pained her.

Strange how she hates talking about it when she never met them properly. Alice didn't quite understand Nettie's grief, but she felt it almost in her own soul, and she longed to comprehend a bit of what her friend was going through. Still, she felt she could not. She could

only offer what minimal support she could. “I like nothing better than to see you happy.”

“I feel quite the same about you.” Nettie rose and walked to the window. “Your friend is here. Why does he always follow you about like a lovesick pup? I wonder if you comprehend his loyalty.”

Since that wasn’t an uncommon comment from Nettie these days, Alice felt free to ignore it. Kirk and she were friends and nothing more. She, too, stood and replaced her gloves. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then? Or when Debby’s better.”

“Yes, I’ll plan on it.”

Alice hurried out of the house, straightening her hat as she went. “It took you

long enough!” To prove her point, she cast a scowl in Kirk Manning’s general direction.

He dismounted from his gray gelding and walked over to Athena, beating Alice there. “Not all of us are at our leisure every morning, Miss Knight.” His green eyes flashed teasingly at her. “Some of us have to work for our living; some of us carve out time every so often to be with our friends in spite of the likelihood that it is a poor idea.”

“Nothing is an excuse for tardiness,” she proclaimed airily, but she didn’t mean a word of it.

Now he helped her mount before returning to his own steed. As he walked, he made some snarky comment about her

abilities as a horsewoman or something. She didn't really listen; she seldom listened to Kirk. He was nice to have around, like an old grandfather clock, but there came a point where she stopped hearing him tick and focused on other, more important things.

Kirk had been a staple in her life since she moved to Pearlbelleville Park. They'd both been off at school, traveling, and doing other things, but now he was back to stay.

He worked in the stables as always, but now, due to his "fancy education," as he termed it, he was the stable manager. Her father did most of the work himself, granted, but it was a wonderful experience for Kirk.

They started out toward the forest at

the back of the estate, Kirk chattering about a colt he expected ‘great things of.’

Yet Alice had something she wanted to bring up, so when there was a pause in the conversation, she cleared her throat. “You know I go to London in a few weeks.”

“Hmm.” Then, without adding another thought, he continued. “I think Gilded Star is going to be one of the best horses we’ve ever trained. He’s a real champion in the making, Alice; we’ll have him at the Derby this year.”

“Oh. That’s nice.” And, after that, Alice’s responses were perfunctory at best. If he wasn’t going to engage in what she wanted to talk about, she wouldn’t engage in what he wanted to talk about.

It was petty, and she really ought to just confront him on it. However, she didn't want to get caught up in another quarrel with him, little as those quarrels usually meant to her.

He was just a man, after all, and men couldn't understand what a girl's first Season meant to her. Furthermore, a man of Kirk's *status* couldn't understand, though she chastised herself for that thought; she liked to believe Kirk had some discernment. He liked *her*, didn't he?

They finished their ride, and Kirk led Athena back to the stables while Alice went inside to prepare for her day.

Chapter Three

Mother and Papa were in the office when Alice arrived back at Pearlbelles Park's manor house.

She called it 'the office,' not 'his office,' because it wasn't really *his*. Papa used it for business every day, yes, but that didn't mean he'd made it his own. It was a place where he worked, not a part of his being. His true office was the stables.

Her mother liked to wander in mid-morning and simply be there. She'd caught them talking, but more often than not, Mother was present to be present—and perhaps to

keep Papa on track, though Alice didn't say that aloud. She respected her father too much to suggest that his focus wasn't all it should be.

She ducked her head into the office. "Didn't you say we had a guest arriving today?"

"Yes." Papa gestured her in and pushed one of his giant accounting books aside. "I did. Peter Strauss. Didn't I tell you all about him?"

"No. Only that he was American and you knew his family." Pearlbelleville Park hosted so many guests that Alice thought nothing of it, but that didn't mean she didn't want to know every available detail about anyone who would be invading her private space.

“He *is* American, and I *do* know his family.” Papa smiled and glanced at Mother. “By the way, Claire, he’ll leave around the time we go to London, maybe a day before. I suppose he’s found arrangements in London with another family.”

Mother drummed her fingers on the desk, and if Alice didn’t know better, she’d have said she rolled her eyes. “How quaint.”

“It’s all part of this article series he’s writing, this living in different homes while he’s here. Though he’s promised me it’ll be nothing personal. General observations, and he’s also writing a series of short stories, I believe.”

“That’s what he says, but I don’t know

about trusting an American reporter. Still, what's done is done." Mother's voice was resigned, and Alice realized that the decision hadn't been run by the mistress of the house as thoroughly as it should've been.

An error Alice would never allow in her own future household, of course.

"He's an American reporter?" Alice dropped onto a second chair across from the desk. "How exactly did you meet his family, Papa?"

Papa shrugged and leaned back on his chair, crossing his arms behind his head. "Several different ways, when I was a young man in Boston. I knew his parents when he was a small boy—his mother is the type who's

always up and doing something, so although they lived in Philadelphia, it wasn't uncommon for the Strausses to be in Boston or New York or down in Virginia with her family, before the war. Lillian Strauss is a force to be reckoned with."

"So hardly a lady," Mother interposed.

Papa raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I don't know. She was born wealthy and married a poor immigrant, so you can draw your own conclusions there. But I wouldn't say she's not a lady so much as she always has a cause. Most outspoken abolitionist I've ever known."

"A lady doesn't need a cause." Yet Mother didn't mean it, for she always had one. They were simply personal to her, not to the

rest of the world.

“Oh, you’d have fought the same battles if you were an American, Claire. You just never saw what Mrs. Strauss did. That’s actually the other way I know his family; Mrs. Strauss’s sister is Mrs. Farjon.”

“Ah. I know of the Farjons.” Mother tapped her chin. “They were friends of Hazel’s, weren’t they?” The late Hazel Knight, Papa’s second wife from those long years of separations and misunderstandings, had lived in Virginia before she’d come to England with him.

“Yes. I suppose their wealth carries gossip about them across the ocean. I don’t know what ever became of their younger son,

but their elder died in the war.” He frowned. “They were one of the few families who actually got out of the war all right—because of Mrs. Farjon’s father’s money, which was all in factories, though I imagine they’ve lost Clairdelune. But they’ve fallen off the face of the planet except for financially. There used to be extravagant parties and constant visits about the country—now, nothing.”

“They did lose a son.” Mother sighed. “There’s nothing harder than losing a child.”

Alice imagined there wasn’t, though *they* never had. Still, this family intrigued her—perhaps it actually would be interesting to have this Peter Strauss stay with them. “Did Mr. Strauss say what his articles will be about,

Papa?”

“The English upper class. He said it was to point out the differences between our nation and the United States—the sort of thing people who can’t experience it for themselves want to read. It’ll all be quite general, and he cares more about the short stories.” Papa scooted back his chair and stood. “I think it’s harmless, though your mother worries.”

“I just don’t like the feeling of being observed—and no doubt judged. He’ll be like his mother, I imagine—a reformer at heart, but without age to temper it, and full of quick opinions that help no one.” Mother sighed as she rose. “I’d best make sure the menu is set for tonight.”

“Yes, and I’ve got to head down to the stables. I imagine Manning has gotten there by now.” Papa walked around the desk. “Alice, I expect you to avoid ignoring Mr. Strauss. He seems like a pleasant man, despite all your mother has forecasted about him, and I want him to feel welcome here. I don’t want you to be the reason why he thinks the British are snobbish.”

Papa was always teasing her like that, and though sometimes she believed he was a little serious, Alice had learned to ignore him in general. After both her parents left, she sat by herself in the office for a bit, thinking it over.

She would be as kind as she could

manage—but Mr. Strauss didn't sound like the type of person she'd like. Her mother was probably right. Though she herself possessed a great deal of reforming zeal, she usually found it unnecessary in others.

The last thing she needed was someone telling her that her life was shallow and petty.

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There was really nothing in the world like a bit of grandeur.

Peter appreciated them as an artist appreciates a fine painting that he could never afford. Though, unlike an art lover, Peter would never purchase anything as extravagant

as an expensive painting. He'd always find something he liked just as much for a quarter the price. Peter understood the feeling behind a painting being worth its weight in gold—to some. But that wasn't his medium.

If he ran across an early edition of any of his favorites during this trip, however, he'd be paying a ridiculous amount of money to make it his. Heaven help his bank account if he stumbled into a bookstore.

A carriage had met Peter at the Creling Station, and he'd received a somewhat bemused look when he tried to talk to the driver as instructions were given for his trunk. Peter had the common sense to know he wasn't supposed to talk to servants; however,

that didn't stop him. It never had, and it never would.

As soon as he was seated in the carriage, he began peering out the window. They rolled through a small, idyllic village and then out into the countryside. Peter couldn't stop smiling. This was a lifelong dream finally being fulfilled, and he felt his soul soaring with joy.

He was in England! The carriage was driving through the same land that Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, and William Shakespeare had lived on. Granted, not near Creling, but still.

The countryside was green, brilliantly so, and he caught sight of a few small

cottages. Then, at last, they passed through the gates into the estate. Tucked to the right was a small brick cottage, which Peter assumed was the gatehouse—he'd, of course, never seen one, but he assumed that's what it was. What a pretty, neat little place!

That was it. Peter was moving to England. He'd stay here at the end of his assignment. It was all his idyllic soul needed for happiness.

Then they swept in front of the house, and Peter hopped out. He wanted to get a good look at the mansion that rose up immediately in front of him, but instead he was greeted by Mr. Knight.

Pleasantries were exchanged. The man

hadn't changed much from the person Peter had seen a few times at Clairdelune in his early childhood; he was older by twenty years but not remarkably different. Same long legs, same broad grin, same voice waffling between a British and American accent now that he was speaking to Peter.

He imagined that, like Riley, Mr. Knight had adopted qualities of accents from all the places he'd lived throughout his life, in America and England, and now he simply imitated the voice of those around him. After a few lines, he settled back into an English accent with a small sigh as if giving up on the effort of pleasing Peter.

Peter couldn't approve more. The last

thing he wanted was someone pretending to be something they weren't around him.

As Mr. Knight turned and held his hand out to his wife—who was absolutely lovely—Peter noted the long line of servants stretching out to the right of the entrance.

Behind Mrs. Knight there were two young ladies and then a scattering of children being held back by two women, who could only be a governess and a nanny based on their clothing.

Peter rose up on his toes and dropped down before bowing to Mrs. Knight. He was so pleased with the entire picture. Everything around him was lovely and perfect, and he was never, ever going to leave England.

Except his family. Why did they all have to be in America?

“These are my daughters, Miss Alice Knight and Miss Ivy Knight.”

Peter shifted his attention from the younger members of the Knight family to the oldest two children. Though, they weren’t exactly children—they were perhaps eighteen and nineteen, both lovely young ladies. Miss Knight was dark-haired, and Miss Ivy was a classic sunshine beauty; the sibling resemblance wasn’t there.

“Mr. Strauss.” Miss Knight curtsied, and her sister imitated her a beat too late. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Miss Ivy quietly echoed the greeting.

Ah. So the eldest was the one who had it all under control. Peter understood family dynamics like that. His wasn't that way, because he was the eldest and he'd never had anything under control, but he'd definitely observed families where such was the case.

"It's lovely to meet both of you, too." He smiled, hoping to befriend Miss Knight and set Miss Ivy at ease. Then he turned back to their parents, not wanting to offend the Knights—he wasn't quite sure of the social customs here, but he knew he was a bit friendlier than most strangers found comfortable.

"We're so glad to have you here!" Mr. Knight's voice breathed enthusiasm. "We have

a lot to catch up on. How are your—?”

“Philip.” Mrs. Knight put a restraining hand on her husband’s arm, and he went silent like any man who was thoroughly beaten. Peter could understand *that*, too, on a more personal level. “Philip, we have to let Mr. Strauss get settled!”

“Oh, of course.” Mr. Knight rattled off orders to servants, and in no time, Peter was following a footman up the grand staircase inside the foyer.

Now he finally had time to look around. He took in the arched ceiling, painted at least a few hundred years ago, though restored within the last few decades; the brilliant woodwork on the banisters; and, once he

reached the top of the stairway, a beautiful marble statue.

“I feel like I’ve stepped into Pemberley.”

“Excuse me, sir?” The footman paused and turned slightly.

“Um, nothing.” At least nothing he could easily explain. The footman didn’t seem the type to read Jane Austen, so that probably wasn’t the best place to start a conversation. He gestured on down the hall, and they resumed their walk. “Have you worked here long?”

The stiffening of the footman’s shoulders confirmed that it was odd for a gentleman to engage with a servant, but Peter

wasn't much of a gentleman. He was in the sense of being gentlemanly, but he wasn't in the sense of being stuffy. "About a year, sir."

"What's your name again? Sorry. I'm horrible with names." Peter thought Mr. Knight had mentioned it when he passed Peter off to this footman, but he wasn't sure. Peter had already had far too many thoughts to remember a small detail like that, curse his unfocused brain.

"Andrew, sir."

"Oh! That's my brother's name." Peter found a grin splitting his cheeks out of happiness rather than habit—the best kind of smile to experience. "My younger brother. He's a blacksmith—or will be. Good man.

Probably your age.”

“Ah.” The footman plainly didn’t know what to say, and he seemed relieved to arrive at a certain door, which he gestured at. “Your room, sir. They’ll bring up your things shortly.”

“Thank you, Andrew! I’ll look for you around.” He stepped into the room, then hesitated. *Wait.* He’d made a new friend—sort of—and he’d better take advantage of that. Not exactly. The very thought of taking advantage of someone made Peter flinch; that wasn’t what he meant. “Andrew?”

“Yes, sir.” The footman reappeared in the doorway. “How can I help you?”

“Andrew, could you tell me a thing or

two about this family?”

The man's eyes widened, and he stood still, his face blank. “I'm sorry, sir. I don't think so.”

Peter held up his hands. “That's commendable, Andrew—I appreciate the loyalty. They're lucky to have you. But, no, nothing bad. Just innocent things. Names of the family members are all I want—and perhaps how to tell them apart so I don't offend anyone, if you don't mind.”

Andrew still looked suspicious, but Peter would soon set him at ease. He would never ask anything incriminating. He might be a reporter, technically, though he was really more of a writer who worked as a reporter.

However, that didn't mean he didn't have a healthy dose of curiosity, and he certainly wanted to understand the dynamics of the household.

“Just answer any questions you feel comfortable answering and ignore anything else I say. I won't be angry if you choose to remain silent on any point.” Peter lowered himself onto the edge of the bed, which gave away easily under him. He bounced. “This is nice.”

For whatever reason—probably because it was childish—this comment seemed to put Andrew at more ease than anything else Peter had said.

“How many children do the Knights

have? Did I see five? I'm bad at arithmetic, I'm afraid." He remembered their faces, or would if he saw them again, but not how many there'd been.

"The Knights have six children, counting Miss Knight and Miss Ivy." Andrew shifted from foot to foot. "Edmond, the young master, and then Caleb, Jackie—John, I mean—and Rebecca."

"Ah! I got the two middle boys mixed up. They must be close in age! But Edmond and Miss Ivy must be far apart in age." He squinted.

Actually, it was strange—hadn't Philip Knight been in America for most of the 1860s? He'd certainly fought in the war. The current

Mrs. Knight wasn't the former Miss Hazel Bailey, who had been married to Mr. Knight at least a few years before she passed away—Peter knew that much. His mother had talked about Miss Bailey marrying Mr. Knight, after all.

Were there three different families here? Mr. Knight and his child or children with Hazel Bailey Knight—Mrs. Knight and her daughter or daughters with another man—and then the children Mr. and Mrs. Knight had had together? He couldn't puzzle it out and might as well just ask. "I'd have sworn Miss Knight was Mr. Knight's daughter, but she can't be."

The footman blinked. "She is his

daughter.”

“Then Mrs. Knight is not her mother? I mean, there was a remarriage, plainly.” Peter didn’t know why the footman would want to hide a detail like that. “Mr. Knight fought in the war in America.”

“Ah.” Now Andrew shifted from foot to foot and cast down his eyes. “It’s complicated. Ned—Edmond—is not Mrs. Knight’s son.”

The footman plainly wasn’t going to tell Peter more about the situation, so he accepted that and nodded. “I see. What’s Ned like?”

“What do you mean?” The shifting continued. Peter was a man of suspicion to the footman, probably partly because he was American and partly because he was a

reporter. Again, not something he much reflected in his day-to-day life, but it did have the unfortunate consequence of suspicion if it was how he was introduced.

Which, of course, was how he would be introduced in England because that was why he was there. That'd be something he'd have to overcome for the next few months. However, hopefully it wouldn't take people long to realize that he was genuinely interested in them.

“Just what he enjoys, how he acts, how old he is. Is he a calm child or a wild one?” He wasn't sure exactly how to explain what he wanted to hear.

“He's ten years old.” More caution, but

apparently this line of questioning wasn't terribly threatening. "He's a calm boy, I think, though I don't see him often. I know he loves riding, and he's a good student."

"Thank you." That would more than suffice. Peter continued to question Andrew on the two younger boys and their little sister. "And the older two girls?"

"Miss Knight and Miss Ivy are twins, and—"

A few of Andrew's words got lost as Peter tucked away this new slice of information. So strange! He wouldn't have thought them full sisters, let alone twins. But he supposed lots of twins didn't look alike.

"—Miss Ivy isn't having her Season,

though, because—” He stopped himself, and Peter paid attention again. Sudden stops always made him pay attention because they meant there was something that hurt, something that needed addressing.

“Because ...?” He’d said Miss Ivy wasn’t having her first Season—which was a young lady’s introduction to society, he believed—although Miss Knight was.

“I suppose you’ll know soon enough.” Andrew shrugged and glanced over his shoulder. “Miss Ivy is simple. Or that’s what they say—I don’t know how true it is, as I’ve never talked to the lady. But Miss Knight is normal.” He flushed. “I shouldn’t have said that, I suppose.”

“I won’t say a word.” He wouldn’t, either. He’d simply use the answers Andrew had given him to be more of a help to the family. Though, perhaps it’d be better if he just left them alone. Despite Andrew’s mysteriousness about the family situation, they seemed well-settled.

Peter’s mother had taught him to care too much about other peoples’ lives, and his natural desire to help people often got in the way of other things. Realistic things. He would die for a stranger, and so he died a little more every day.

“Thank you, Andrew. That was quite helpful! It’ll let me not feel like such a fool as I get to know everyone.” That was another

problem of his. He loved to help, but sometimes it was hard to remember all the names without a bit of preparation.

Andrew nodded, attempted a bow, then flushed and disappeared. Poor Andrew. It couldn't be easy being a footman on a big estate like this and having a guest suddenly pull one out of one's routine to ask prying questions.

After Andrew was gone, Peter opened his trunks and found his Bible. He had no idea what the Knights meant by telling him to 'freshen up.' Perhaps he could use it as an opportunity to think through these next few weeks—and, more importantly, pray through them.

Chapter Four

Alice glanced up the table as Mother laughed. She certainly hadn't expected *that*, given that she was seated next to Mr. Strauss. Mother simply didn't find Americans amusing.

Yet she had laughed, and now she spoke to him quietly, a small smile still touching her lips. She liked him?

Alice leaned over to Ivy. "So Mother was wrong about Mr. Strauss. Interesting."

Ivy glanced up from her plate briefly, smiled, and ducked her head again. "He has a nice face, and he feels nice, too. I'm not surprised. I'm glad he's made her laugh."

Mr. Strauss might ‘feel nice,’ but Mother wasn’t usually friendly toward people she’d never met before.

“He does seem fairly easy-going for an American.” He’d barely spoken more than a few words to Alice, but she didn’t see the obnoxiousness in him that she’d expected. Though she wasn’t quite sure why she felt that way. After all, she supposed the one American she’d actually known—her father’s late wife, Hazel, who was Ned’s mother—hadn’t been annoying. Far from it, she’d been a lovely lady.

But Alice didn’t make the rules. She simply followed them.

Mother turned to Papa. “Philip, were

you ever in Philadelphia?”

Papa raised his eyebrows and cast his eyes down the table to Alice. “Yes, a long time ago.”

“It can’t be as pretty as Mr. Strauss tells me.” Mother took a sip from her glass. “I don’t believe it is anywhere as pretty as England.”

“It’s not!” Mr. Strauss tossed up his hands. “I can honestly say it’s not. But since I must live outside England, I do love Philadelphia.”

Oh. That was why Mother liked him so much. Probably the type to heavily compliment everyone and everything he met in hopes of gaining favor.

“I suppose our homes, where our dear

ones are, are always very pretty to us,” Mother remarked pensively.

“Quite true! I could live in the slums with my family, and I’d love it,” said Mr. Strauss. Then he seemed to hesitate. “I never have, in a time that I could remember, lived in a particularly bad area, but we are, all of us, capable of finding joy wherever we are.”

Mother nodded, and there was a type of respect in her eyes that Alice was unused to seeing in her mother. Usually Mother seemed to have only a distant respect even for those she greatly admired, but this was different. Alice didn’t see why; she didn’t believe Mr. Strauss to be terribly sincere.

“Very true.” Mother said the words like

they were an oath. Like Ivy, she must see something in Mr. Strauss that Alice failed to. “I often feel people underestimate the simple joy the presence of someone you love can bring to any situation, regardless of how dour.”

Alice dropped her eyes with a small smile. Of course, Mr. Strauss would assume Mother was a lady of influence making a flippant remark given her shallow understanding of what ‘dour circumstances’ were. However, Mother had gone through about as bad a time as she could when Alice and Ivy were babies—Alice loved to hear that their presence during that period had been a support and not a burden.

Alice feared being a burden. It was one area where she far and away passed Ivy, though Mother would probably slap her if she indicated that she believed her sister was a burden.

Still, it was true, wasn't it? Ivy was more dependent—Ivy wasn't the one getting her first Season this year. Alice shook her head and raised her eyes to Mr. Strauss's face. She could worry about Ivy later, much later, when her own circumstances were settled.

If Mr. Strauss felt some inconsistency, some lack of experience in Mother's words, he gave no indication. "I quite agree. Sadly, people also tend to turn on each other during these times of stress. It takes a strong

relationship to ride troubles out and stay thankful for the blessing of each other. My parents certainly found that out. I wish joy was our default and sadness the option rather than vice versa. Human nature seems to me to be remarkably pessimistic.”

Alice had had no interest in the conversation until now, and usually she refrained from adding her thoughts to any given conversation, but the truth of human nature intrigued her. Always had.

She did not naturally have a good understanding of the hearts and minds of others, and in fact struggled at times to understand even her own thoughts and feelings, and so, she sought knowledge that

would never satiate.

After all, humanity wasn't pessimistic. It was emotional.

"Mr. Strauss," Alice said, and instantly all eyes were on her. Her mother looked impatient and her father amused. As per usual. She hadn't intended to engage with this particular guest for a variety of reasons—his being a reporter made her nervous, for one—but she felt she must break her rule.

She was now thankful she'd established her intention to talk with anyone she pleased while still a child. Her parents were consequently rarely shocked by her tendency to interrupt.

"Mr. Strauss, I disagree. Humanity is

not so much pessimistic as incapable of staying with one emotion for any length of time. They allow the little griefs of the moment to continually strike away all else—but it could happen as much with a positive feeling as a negative one, I think.”

Mr. Strauss smiled, apparently pleased with her interruption. That was a first. “Perhaps you are right, Miss Knight. At times I can paint with too broad a brush. I do feel that humanity is quite explored at length in the pages of the Bible, and I think our thoughts—without holy guidance—are often a vapor. It makes sense that emotion would be the key tendency since we are told, over and over again, that the only true stability comes from

God. However, I do feel we tend toward pessimism as a group. People, I mean. Perhaps it's because in pessimism, Satan can more thoroughly tempt us. It's yet another trap to catch us with."

"Yes, Mr. Strauss is right." Mother regarded the man thoughtfully. "I've seen how pessimism erodes at people. My sister is a prime example, though Philip wouldn't like me mentioning it—he'd rather I be optimistic about our dear Christina. But I'm interested to know, Mr. Strauss—would you consider yourself a pessimist, then?"

"Hmm." Mr. Strauss took a bite of his food and seemed to consider this as he chewed. "No. I would not. But only as I would

not consider myself a sinner anymore, either. I struggled long and hard with my perpetual negative thoughts. Now that I am at last unleashed, I'm able to be a great deal cheerier. I still struggle. We all have our pet sins, I suppose."

Alice couldn't resist a small laugh. "What do you define as a 'pet sin,' Mr. Strauss?"

Mother sent her an '*Alice*' look, but Mr. Strauss's face was calm as he again seemed to mull this over, working his jaw as if he were chewing even though he hadn't taken another bite. Alice did like that—how he plainly was giving the conversation all his mind. So many people didn't take Alice seriously—it was

always a relief when someone did. Maybe that was why Mother had taken a liking to him.

“Well.” Mr. Strauss tapped his chin. “I define ‘pet sins’ as a sin we hold closely to, and that, even if we recognize it—which we eventually should if we are Christians fellowshiping with other Christians regularly—we struggle with still for a long period of time. Perhaps even forever. I think there are also a lot of feelings of despair associated with what I’d call a pet sin—‘I’ll never get over it’ or ‘This is just how I am,’ for instance.”

Alice supposed that made sense but it was still rather vague. “Could you give me an example?”

“I can.” He glanced upwards and again

there was that moment of hesitation. “Um. Yes. Talking from my own experience, I’ll hide my thoughts—my convictions, I mean. I did this for years with my cousin. It took me a long time to confront him, and though it was not my responsibility to change him, it was my responsibility, as a Christian, to point out the many ways he was sending his own life in a downward spiral.” Mr. Strauss shrugged. “For years, I let him be. I wasn’t really his friend because I didn’t say, ‘Riley, I love you enough to tell you that your sins will catch up to you—and already have.’ That’s one thing I struggle with. I suppose conflict in general.” He took a sip of his drink. “Not generally something I want to engage in.”

Then, in Alice's opinion, he was no real man. She could only respect a man who engaged his demons and others' head-on.

"Thank you for sharing that." Mother cast Alice a 'that's really enough' look. She rose, and the men clattered to their feet. "I think we'd better go through to the drawing room. We'll see you gentlemen in a bit."

Alice reluctantly rose and followed her mother and Ivy out of the room. Oddly, she didn't receive a scolding for arguing with a gentleman guest, but her mother's look was enough. It usually was.



Mr. Knight was pleasant enough, and Peter liked to tell him about America, about the families they both knew there, and so on—something he only asked questions about when his wife wasn't present.

Bad memories, perhaps? If he were to guess, he'd say Mr. Knight's marriage to the former Miss Hazel Bailey was a sore subject. Even while chatting about their youths in America, Mr. Knight avoided the subject of his first wife—or *second*? *What was the timeline with the first and second Mrs. Philip Knight?*

Still, they had a nice conversation about Peter's family and mutual acquaintances, and Peter discovered that, though perhaps a bit immature in some areas,

Mr. Knight had a fairly firm faith in God. Overall, he liked the man. However, Mrs. Knight presented more of a challenge. Her daughter, even more so.

The woman had clearly gone through a lot in her lifetime, and she bore it nobly. The daughter was just a girl with a mind full of thoughts and beliefs that she longed to express—and, perhaps, unsure how to handle a somewhat tumultuous relationship with the male authorities in her life. That in itself made her infinitely more attractive. People who had something to express and people who had problems to work through were generally more attractive to him than people who didn't.

Alice Knight. The name suited her,

Peter decided. She was maybe eighteen or nineteen, quite noble, with all the characteristics of a knight. He supposed he ought to say she had all the characteristics of a lady, but she was too brave a girl to be tucked away in a tower somewhere. He trusted her to take a horse and join in whatever battle was being waged at the moment.

Alice, that was a good name for her, too. Her father's choice, he believed—he'd known another Alice Knight, or rather known of her, he thought. Probably an aunt. Yet, despite being a simple namesake not culled out specifically for her, he felt the name suited the young lady.

Peter had turned down a glass of

brandy, but he was happy to sit and chat with Mr. Knight even though his decision not to drink 'socially' seemed to confuse the man. Peter was used to that reaction.

But now Mr. Knight had finished his own glass, and they left the room behind to 'join the ladies.' Peter had forgotten how steeped in tradition every event in the life of the upper class was, even more so here than in America. Everything had a schedule, a *modus operandi*, and there was no disrupting that flow. The ladies had no one to visit with, yet they waited in the drawing room for the men to join them.

Mr. Knight had mentioned he needed a word with his wife about some domestic

matter—a dinner party he'd thought they planned but didn't remember the details of, he'd said—so he went to her as soon as they entered the room. That left Peter to talk with the Miss Knights.

Miss Ivy Knight seemed quite sweet. She had a pretty smile—honestly, she was altogether lovely, in a way that a younger Peter might've found attractive. Now he wasn't a younger Peter, though, and he simply admired her, the way any sane man can admire a pretty lady. He felt that it was in her character that her true goodness must shine forth, however. Despite her reported 'simpleness,' he saw kindness and consideration in her that was rare to her age

and social status.

And, of course, there was Miss Knight. Bright as the stars and yet subtle, bold as brass and yet somehow ... afraid.

Hmm. He'd have to explore that at a later time.

There was, of course, a small possibility he'd imagined the fear. He did have a very active imagination, after all. But somehow that made sense. He believed her to be more bluster than reality, and that intrigued him.

Still, he'd paid a great deal of attention to Miss Knight and barely any to Miss Ivy, and that wasn't fair. Even if he was considerably intrigued by Miss Knight.

"Miss Ivy, your mother mentioned to

me that you are a very gifted pianist! I'm somewhat of a music lover myself, though I'm not any good. Perhaps you could play for me someday?"

Miss Ivy flushed, glanced down, but nodded. "I'd like that very much."

"Oh, good! I taught myself a bit of piano, and I do love singing—but I'm afraid I have no real talent." He smiled and shrugged. "Doesn't mean I can't appreciate it."

"Of course not!" Miss Ivy's eyes rose to his, flashing with conviction. He saw in her the same untamed passion he'd had for writing at her age, and he couldn't help but admire it. "Everyone should be able to listen to and enjoy music—and even play it, if they want—

even if they're not talented and knowledgeable. There should never be any shame in that! No one should restrict art to the experts."

Peter quite agreed, and he happily engaged Miss Ivy in further conversation. He found her to be an intelligent young lady—shy but quick to warm up once she hit a subject she cared about. How could anyone call this woman simple?

He soon discovered she liked to read—though she admitted to getting bored by long stretches of prose unless she was being read to—and that started another conversation.

It took Peter a bit to realize poor Miss Knight had drifted off, apparently having no

interest in music or literature. Of course, he could talk to her later, but he had wanted to find out a bit more about that fear, that bold fear.

That would have to wait for another day, however. The hours had slipped away while he talked to Miss Ivy, and it was time to head up for the evening if he wanted to do any reading tonight, which he did. He bid good night to the Knights and headed up to his room, finding it after only one wrong turn.

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It was a lovely afternoon, and Alice and Ivy agreed to take the children out for a walk.

Ivy was ever-maternal, especially as of this last year, and much as it annoyed Alice, it allowed her to feel less pressure to understand the children's emotions.

Which was something she never could do. She had enough trouble with adults. Children? She simply didn't sympathize with them. She could play with them, tease them, and manage them, but having an actual conversation where she tried to relate to their feelings was another thing altogether.

So, Alice walked alongside Ivy with the boys and Rebecca running ahead.

They were just passing a fountain when she heard Mr. Strauss's voice behind her. "Miss Knight! Miss Ivy!"

Alice paused and turned. “Mr. Strauss?”

He jogged up next to them, slightly out of breath but smiling. “Your parents sent me out to find you. I wanted to see the gardens, as well as meet your brothers and sister.”

“I see.” She glanced at Ivy and offered a small smile. She’d gone from finding Mr. Strauss annoying to finding him rather amusing. He’d spoken with her sister at length about all kinds of things that were of little interest to her, and she’d found it funny. Most men she knew didn’t care about novels, and those who talked about music were generally just complimenting some mildly talented debutante.

He was different. He really cared, and

she could tell. It was endearing. He had that same way of paying attention to Ivy that her father did, but Mr. Strauss seemed to have more understanding for Ivy's mode of expressing herself, which, to be fair, could be somewhat hard to follow.

"Ivy!" Rebecca's chubby legs carried her over to her sister but had her crashing into Ivy's skirts. She then hesitated, her shyness arriving full-force as she caught sight of Mr. Strauss. "Oh."

"What is it, Rebecca?" Ivy murmured, drawing her younger sister close as she knelt. Yes, Ivy had the touch, and Alice didn't, and it was endlessly irritating even as it never failed to bring a smile to her twin's face. Really, just

for that, Alice not having a talent with reassuring children was worth it. Ivy needed more small triumphs. Everyone did, but Ivy more than others.

Alice, on the other hand? Everything was on her side, so one small issue in her character wasn't really a problem. Or that's what she told herself when, suddenly stricken with insomnia on late winter nights, she began to wonder why she, a woman, must be so cold.

Her mother was cold in some ways of course, but not in the same way Alice was. She could easily relate to her children. Maybe that was the problem—once Alice had babies of her own, she would receive the full benefits of womanhood and graduate to a class above

what she had previously arisen to. Yes, that must be it.

That thought completed, and the worries again put off until tomorrow, Alice turned back to Ivy, who was talking to Rebecca softly about something Jackie had done which 'huht.' Mr. Strauss watched for a minute, then looked up to Alice with a slight smile.

He leaned toward her. "Your sister is a gem, isn't she?"

Alice stared at him for a moment before nodding. "She is, yes. At least Anna and Miss Fletcher are often thankful for her."

"She's quite admirable, and she has a smart, quick mind. I can't imagine what

people meant—” Then he cut himself off and flushed. “I’m sorry, Miss Knight. A footman told me that Miss Ivy was called ‘simple,’ though he didn’t seem to think so. And he was right. I don’t see it in her. I do see anxiety, and I do see that sensitivity of an artist that can lead to so many different small ailments. She seems frail. Simple? Never.”

Alice wanted to shrug, but she refrained. Saying Ivy wasn’t simple based on the times when she was in her element, without a doubt of what she was supposed to do and how she was supposed to do it, and surrounded by people she loved ... It was hardly fair. As far as Alice could tell, Ivy’s anxieties ebbed and flowed, at times disabling

her and at others hardly seeming to exist. "Ivy does often surprise people," was the only answer she could allow.

"There's nothing nicer than a person who is often surprising people!" Mr. Strauss grinned again and turned to wait for Ivy to finish speaking with Rebecca.

"Who's that?" Rebecca asked.

Ivy glanced up. "Mr. Strauss. He's staying with us for a bit. He came all the way from America, and he writes books."

Rebecca nodded solemnly before running off.

"I feel sorry for Rebecca," he said, extending a hand to Ivy.

She took it and stood. "You do?"

“Yes. A daughter after three sons, with her own sisters so many years older than her. As she grows older, she will likely either struggle with her femininity or feel quite alone. But of course it’ll be a growing experience.”

Ivy’s face lit up with comprehension, and she asked Mr. Strauss a question, which he answered. Alice immediately dropped back. She had no use for Mr. Strauss’s mental quandaries about how someone’s birth order would shape their nature.

Mr. Strauss paused in his walk and leaned back. “Miss Knight, you ride?”

“Yes.” What had they been talking about that had led to that? If Ivy was making

comments about her to strangers, innocent though they might be, Alice would have to speak to her.

“Your father loves horses, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, he does. It’s something we can do together.” Ride horses, breed them, talk about them. She was proud of her knowledge and experience, though some of it was reportedly inappropriate for a woman. But it drew her closer to Papa, and in doing so, made her life feel more on balance. More secure. As if, perhaps, everything had always been all right.

“I’m not very good at riding,” Mr. Strauss admitted. “Oh, I try, but there were a few times my cousin—Riley—had me thrown as a boy. I broke my arm once! Ever since, it’s

intimidated me, and I ride as little as possible.”

Alice wavered somewhere between wanting to get him on a horse and wanting to drop the subject and let him and his searching eyes get back to Ivy. However, at last she offered a small smile, determined to be polite if nothing else. “If you like, I can introduce you to a gentler horse, and we can go riding.”

“Maybe! Though I don’t know if we’ll have time.” Mr. Strauss started to turn, then laughed. “Honestly, the idea makes me nervous. I like horses, from a distance, but when I get close to them, I’m seized with fear! I suppose the likelihood of getting thrown again is small, though.”

It wasn't necessarily small, though Alice could think of at least half a dozen horses with which it would be highly unlikely. Still, she wouldn't press. She wasn't sure how she felt about a man so willing to admit his shortcomings, and she didn't at all know what to do with him.

However, she didn't get to reply as the boys and Rebecca ran up to her.

"Alice, Anna doesn't want to take us down to the brook alone, but she said maybe you'd walk with us, and then she wouldn't be alone." Caleb raced through the words, panting them out as he recovered from the speed he'd used to reach her. "Will you?"

"Oh, I suppose." It might be fun to go

on a longer walk, and Anna would certainly need help keeping them all out of the water. After all, the hours were edging toward teatime. “Ivy and Mr. Strauss might like to go back to the mansion.”

“If it’s all right with you, I’d love to see the brook.” Mr. Strauss glanced between Alice and Caleb. “That is, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble to wait for me. I don’t walk nearly as fast as you boys will be able to.”

Caleb’s blue eyes flicked over Mr. Strauss, appraising him. “You could come.”

“Oh, good!”

They started away from the gardens toward a brook, which flowed through the wooded portion of the estate grounds. Mr.

Strauss walked ahead with the boys, talking to them, while Alice and Ivy drifted behind with Rebecca and Anna.

“He’s got a way with them,” Ivy remarked, swinging Rebecca’s hand. “I knew he would. He’s a nice man, isn’t he, Alice?”

“Yes, I suppose.” She wasn’t sure how she felt about him yet. “I think he sincerely cares about others’ feelings.” Though, why, she couldn’t imagine. It was *actions* that mattered. She supposed most peoples’ actions were at least mildly inspired by their feelings, if not heavily. Alice tried to avoid it, but at times she wondered if even she was immune.

“I like him. Not as much as you,” Ivy amended. “Not as much as Nettie or Mother or

my other friends. I don't think I will. But don't you think we've always been needing a brother?"

"We have brothers." They were perfectly all right, as far as little boys went, and she was glad they weren't older than her. She had an idea that having an older brother would make her position in the family a great deal more replaceable. She would be married before Ned was a man, though, thankfully. "Mr. Strauss is just a guest, Ivy. I can't have you getting too attached to him." Ivy's decisions were ruled by her emotions, and it suddenly struck Alice that Mr. Strauss could be a danger for that reason.

He was a few years older than her, and

wiser, and probably charming in his gentle way. If Ivy fell for a man like that, a poor American, only to be disappointed, she would —

Ivy shook her head. “You think I’ll come to care for him, don’t you? You know, in a romantic way.” Her eyes flickered down to Rebecca for a moment and then returned to Alice’s face, but she didn’t flush. “I won’t. He’s not ...” A small chuckle. “No. But I do like him for *you*.”

Alice blinked. There were two ridiculous things in that sentence. First, Ivy thinking that she would be able to recommend a man to Alice who was *everything* Mr. Strauss was. And second, that Ivy had even *thought* of

it. “Ivy!” She glanced over her shoulder at Anna, who thankfully seemed distracted trying to decide if she should walk forward and keep Jackie from falling over as he took big, Mr. Strauss-matching strides in his thick boots.

Content that the servant wasn’t listening in, Alice returned her gaze to her sister. “Ivy, I can’t have you suggesting such things. I’ve told you what type of man I’m looking for, and why would you think—”

“He’s a Christian! He’s kind and mature, which is important.” Ivy smiled weakly. “I’m sorry I mentioned it. I didn’t know it’d offend you. It was just a thought.”

“Keep it a thought.” She didn’t want Mr. Strauss or anyone else to catch wind that

Ivy believed he was an option. Given that they were sisters, and most sisters discussed such things, there might get to be some assumptions that Alice didn't want anyone to make.

She watched Mr. Strauss walking ahead, laughing at something Caleb had said. "See him with the boys? He wants to be a father figure to all of us. He saw something in Mother and Papa last night—something that made him think the both of us need a man like that in our life." Or at least that's what she'd suspected based on the way he talked, the way he treated Ivy. Fatherly, caring, understanding. He wanted to help, to fill a role.

It was filled. Everything was fine. It'd always been just *fine*.

“He may be of some use to us, however. Or to me. During my Season, I mean. He does seem to understand people well.” A skill Alice was sadly lacking in. “He must know how men think. Perhaps he'll help us! But let's leave it there.”

“Very well.” Ivy scuffed a foot in the grass, clearly frustrated with Alice in some way, but she didn't ask. If Ivy thought Alice would consider a relationship with anyone she wasn't introduced to at a ball, well, she didn't want to call her sister wrong, but she was. She just was.

Chapter Five

Miss Knight was sitting by herself after dinner, staring into the fire with her eyes absent. Normally, Peter left people who seemed consumed by their own thoughts alone—that was what he preferred. But something told him she wasn't the type to enjoy her own ponderings.

She continued to puzzle him. *Strong and weak*. Over and over again, those words echoed in his head. Miss Ivy was a delicate flower that would continue to bloom if crushed; he didn't sense that in Miss Knight. She was more like a mighty pine that, once

felled, would lie there until it crumbled into splinters. He didn't know how she would handle collapse, or if she would at all.

Was it his business? No. Normally he would've made his observations within his own mind and kept silent. However, something about her compelled him to take a seat near her and make the necessary pleasantries.

After conversation faded again, he asked her if they could visit the library with Miss Ivy. "I haven't had a chance, and Miss Ivy has told me about it often. Of course I wouldn't go with her alone."

"Of course." There was grudging respect in her eyes. Did she think it was so

different in America that he wouldn't take care of Miss Ivy's reputation? He honestly wasn't sure why Miss Knight was so suspicious of him.

Had America stolen her father? Was that her reasoning? Or was she just too traditional to conceive of a friendship with him? He supposed it wasn't exactly normal, but he made friends with anyone he could, and that usually included women. Not in an improper way—most women just seemed to, for no discernable reason, confide in him.

It was simultaneously frustrating and touching.

The three of them went to the library together, and Miss Ivy rambled on about their

collection, who had added books over the years, and so on. Peter found it interesting but couldn't help but be concerned about Miss Knight, and he began searching for a conversation topic that would suit all three of them.

It was when he gave up, however, that he succeeded. "Do either of your parents read?" he asked, deciding to focus his efforts on Miss Ivy, who actually wanted to talk to him. Reading, he felt, they could talk about.

Miss Ivy answered that her mother would read occasionally, and Miss Knight's eyes focused on them both, interested for the first time.

Thank God, he thought.

“Mother reads what Nettie does,” Miss Knight said. “But then she’s not had time until lately to read.”

“Oh?” Peter supposed the lady had had a child almost every year, but she only had somewhere in the range of three to five children—he’d gotten confused at this point as to which were hers by birth and which by marriage. Ned certainly was the child of the late Mrs. Hazel Bailey Knight, but otherwise he didn’t know.

“Yes, because—” Then Miss Ivy stopped and looked to Miss Knight.

There was a moment in which the sisters stared each other down, clearly unsure who was going to communicate what. Then

Miss Knight cleared her throat.

“Mr. Strauss, I know you asked one of our footmen for details about our family, and he declined to give you the full story.” Her dark eyes focused on him, intense to the point of anger. “If I were to tell you my family history, I don’t know what your reaction would be. Ivy promises me you are a fair, compassionate man, but I don’t know you, and you are a reporter.”

Peter winced. “I am at that. But I’m not the type of reporter who would ever discuss private details publicly, either in writing or with my mouth.” He struggled for the correct words. “I always take my cues from Proverbs. ‘Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue

keepeth his soul from troubles.’”

“I see.” Miss Knight glanced at Miss Ivy.

She nodded.

“I’ll tell you a bit of what’s happened, so that there need be no awkwardness to us.”

She gestured to a few chairs across the library.

“It’s a simple story, really.”

Miss Ivy raised her eyebrows. “It is *not*.”

“Nevertheless, let’s sit down and go over it. Quickly.”

Curiosity spiked, but determined to remain compassionate, Peter took a seat and fixed his eyes on Miss Knight’s face.

“Simply put, my parents eloped when they were quite young, from Pearlbelleville Park,

where my mother was visiting. At the time, my father had not been declared his uncle's heir, and our mother's father disapproved of the match." Miss Knight shrugged. "It was quite unfair, I admit, but the man was never exactly stable, from my understanding. He separated them, and my mother and father fell out of contact. Of course, my mother discovered Ivy and I would be arriving some time later."

"Ah." It sounded like the plot of a dime novel, but Peter knew that, to those involved, it must've been quite difficult. "Your father was in America for ten years or so—that much I know."

"Yes. My mother was unable to contact

him, and I believe he fought in your Civil War. When he returned here, upon his uncle's death, as the heir of Pearlbelleville Park, he had remarried. My parents' marriage had been annulled, you see, and Ivy and I were kept in hiding in London for most of our lives."

Miss Ivy glanced at her sister before speaking. "Our mother had to work in London, but she used an assumed name. She doesn't want anyone to know about it, even now, though *I'm* proud of her."

"But no one of any sense would accept that." By Miss Knight's tone, Peter decided that the fact that society wouldn't accept her mother's past actions weighed heavily on the young lady.

“Yet that’s what happened.” Miss Ivy, on the other hand, saw only her mother’s strength, not her shame. Peter was inclined to agree with her.

“After Mrs. Hazel Knight passed on, due to an illness, our parents remarried of course. So Ned is our half-brother while Caleb, Jackie, and Rebecca share the same parents.” Miss Knight’s eyes never left Peter’s face for an instant. “It’s not a pretty story. My mother has often said that it didn’t end as happily as she would’ve preferred; it was all rather complicated. However, now we’re all right, and that’s what matters.”

But Miss Knight wasn’t all right. Peter didn’t push it; he simply accepted it with slow

nods and what he hoped was a thoughtful expression.

“Do the younger children know?”

“Ned knows about his mother, and Papa is telling him little bits as time goes on.” Miss Ivy cocked her head. “But not the younger ones. Not yet.”

Miss Knight cleared her throat. “Mother says she wants to tell them all when they’re older, so they can handle any gossip they hear with grace.”

“I think that’s the way to go about it. It never does work to keep secrets from your children for long. They’ll always find out, and then the betrayal will be great.”

Miss Knight’s lips twitched, then her

face immediately went neutral. “Yes, that is my mother’s intention.”

But she didn’t believe it? Peter never would know what to think about her. But he knew he liked her, and he knew there was more to her than the simple guise of disgust she seemed to put on around him.

Unlike Miss Ivy, she didn’t necessarily bring out the father in him. He wanted to protect her in more of a ... His thoughts trailed off as he arrived at a conclusion and winced. *Well then.* If that was the case, he’d better nip that in the bud. As long as he kept himself where he was at—harmless admiration, the attraction simmering below the surface, where it belonged—he’d be fine.

It was clear that she had no interest in him, which to Peter was a clear indication that God wasn't behind the feelings he had for her, minimal as they were.

Besides, Peter didn't believe God would send romance his way for a long time. Not Peter. He'd be single forever, or he'd marry when he was considerably older. He didn't deserve a lasting relationship, given how badly he'd handled his infatuation with Maddie. In his opinion, that disqualified him from any sort of attachment to a woman in the near future.

No, he couldn't offer Miss Knight a healthy relationship. He wouldn't even try. He'd be kind to her, and to her family, and do

what he could, but he wouldn't pursue her.

Besides, it was clear she had intentions to do well. Anything she did with Peter would be a step down—she didn't even seem to want his friendship. She was a bit of a snob about it, honestly, and he really ought to find that annoying, but he didn't. He understood now.

She had to marry well because she had to escape. She had to marry well because she had to be secure. She had to marry well because she didn't believe in God's control of her life enough to allow Him to take His time in introducing her to her future husband.

Peter did have a bit of practical wisdom, and he did know women—and perhaps more importantly for her, men. He'd

have to pray for her of course, but could he perhaps be a help to her during her Season?

He hoped so. Granted, he'd be staying with someone else in London, but they'd be moving in and out of the same circles, presumably. He'd see her from time to time, and when he did, perhaps he could offer her some sort of help. Prayer, biblical counsel, someone to talk to—Peter could offer all of the above.

Lord, if I can help her ...

It seemed in that moment like a worthy cause, and he didn't have a nervous feeling of doubt that usually plagued him when one of his 'worthy causes' was on the verge of going sour.

He spoke to Miss Knight and Miss Ivy for a few minutes more, assuring them that he would not share this with anyone else but that he was also available to discuss it further. Miss Ivy plainly believed his sincerity, while Miss Knight remained skeptical, but perhaps not as skeptical as she had been.

After he left, he went straight to his room and again turned to his old Bible.

“Lord,” he whispered, “I think You’ve given me some slight feelings for Miss Alice Knight, not so that I might pursue her but so that I might help her. If this is true, keep me on the right path. If it’s not, shove me away from it before I’m more involved. But if I can offer her useful counsel, let me.”

He stayed up late into the night, consulting God on this subject and then others, before he fell into an exhausted sleep, determined to continue seeking ways to help.

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It wouldn't be long now until Alice left for London. She supposed she ought to spend these last few days with her siblings, as she was sure they'd miss each other very much, but instead she was drawn down to the stables.

There would be horses she could ride in London, and knowing her father, they would be as fine as Athena. Yet they wouldn't be

Athena. Perhaps she could talk her father into having her mare sent up after they were settled in London.

Athena would probably feel a bit cramped in London, though. She was and always had been a country horse, and Alice wasn't at all sure how she'd react to the city. Perhaps it was for the best to leave her here.

So she leaned against the stall door and grieved the upcoming loss.

“Alice?”

Without turning to him, she acknowledged Kirk with a gesture of her hand. “I didn't realize you'd be here. I'd have thought you'd be out training in the paddock.”

“Even we poor stable boys must take

rests occasionally.” He came to stand next to her. “Not taking her to London?”

“No, I was just thinking about that. I’ve no idea how she’d react, so I probably shouldn’t.”

“Yes, that’s probably wise. Some horses can’t handle the traffic.” Kirk leaned against the stall door, too close for Alice’s comfort. She leaned back.

“I’ll step in with her.”

He moved to the side, and she opened the stall door and eased in next to Athena. The horse whinnied softly, her big brown eyes blinking at Alice, probably having not expected the intrusion.

“Of course, you don’t have to go,” Kirk

said.

Alice raised her eyebrows. Had she heard him correctly? She looked up at him. “What?”

“You don’t have to go to London.” He started to smile, then it quickly faded. “I feel as if I could have stated that with more explanation.”

She stared at him for a minute. “Yes, you could have.”

“It’s just that I’ve only just gotten back, Alice. I’ve been back three months, but that’s hardly anything. I had no clue this was the ... I mean, I suppose I knew you were eighteen, and I knew ... but I didn’t know that it was so immediate. I thought we’d have some time—”

Alice's eyes narrowed. If he was insinuating what she thought he was insinuating—! “Time for what?”

“Time for us, Alice.” He stood in the doorway, blocking her exit, hands folded across his chest. “You know how it’s always been. Yet I wanted time to get reacquainted. Still, this will have to do. I want you to stay at Pearlbelles. You don’t need to go to London—there’d be no use in you debuting. It’s simply something to do. Now that I’m here—”

“Stop.” Alice’s breaths came in short pants. “You can’t mean to say that you believed we ... That you thought we were—” She shook her head. So Nettie had been right. Of course—Nettie was always right. Yet it just

wasn't fair that Nettie should be so very accurate in her thoughts. "I've done nothing to encourage this."

Kirk blinked. "You mean—"

"I mean I don't ... I don't want *anything* with you, Kirk. Certainly not romance. I was always meant to have more than—" She stopped herself, but her hands had already risen to gesture toward him.

His green eyes snapped in a way she well remembered. It didn't happen often, but they burnt fierce and bright, and Alice didn't know that there was anything within her power that could douse that flame. "You mean to say that our friendship means nothing to you?"

“No! Not at all. Our friendship meant a great deal to me. It always will! But it is just that. It is a friendship.”

His arms dropped to his sides, and his fists clenched. “Then why all this familiarity?”

“Familiarity? I treated you as I always —”

“When we were children, yes, but if you had no interest, why did you write to me for so long? And why did you greet me so kindly?”

Lovely. Now he was making her angry in return. She let her next words bite as they were meant to. “Oh, yes, and being kind is practically agreeing to an unspoken marriage proposal. I see. I didn’t know.”

“No! It ...” He stumbled about for words, his hands making gestures in the air until, at last, he landed on a suitable response. “I never would suppose such a thing. The decisions you make are your own, and I’ve no right to question them. But it has always been clear to me that you found me interesting.”

She huffed. “I find many things and people interesting!”

“You know what I mean.” He glared at her. “I never would have thought you so little, Alice. I thought you were different. I should’ve known they’d turn you into what you are today. All you care about is ... is securing a proper match.”

Of course. That was all that mattered!

She was about to speak when he interrupted her.

“I didn’t think I’d find such cruelty in you, Alice Knight.” His words were bitter now, his anger having risen to a fever pitch that allowed that strange, eloquent calm he always possessed in these moments. “I see how your whole rotten class has changed you into a woman I never thought I’d see within you. Yet here you are.”

That brought the words to the surface, and quickly. “You say I am prejudiced against you based on your class—aren’t you just the same?” She stamped her foot. “How dare you? In my house, on my land, you insult me and everyone around me. Did it ever occur to you

that you're not the most handsome, charming man on the planet? That I simply don't want you because I don't want you?"

Athena shifted next to her, obviously uncomfortable with the screaming around her. Alice stormed out of the stall, past Kirk.

"Alice—" His voice had lost some of its anger, though there was still a frustrated undertone.

He wanted to talk to her? She didn't want to talk to him. Apparently talking to a man was exactly the same as entering a betrothal these days. With Kirk, she couldn't risk it.

She kept walking until she reached her bedroom, where she sat on the edge of her bed

and stared at the wall for a solid hour.

Chapter Six

After dinner that night, Alice was still in a daze. She excused herself quickly and went to her room. This time, instead of inaction, she chose to pace up and down, her thoughts swirling.

It was unfair for Kirk to make those accusations of her—but perhaps she'd been unfair to him in return. She hadn't meant to be, but that was how it had turned out.

There was a gentle rap at her door shortly after her maid left. Alice turned to the entryway and called, "Who is it?"

"Your mother. May I come in?"

Oh. What was her mother doing here? Generally they didn't talk to each other after they said good night—unless Alice was in trouble or there was something vitally important to go over.

Alice swallowed. "Of course."

The door opened, and Mother entered and let it click shut behind her. "You were so glum at dinner tonight and then you came up early. Mr. Strauss was concerned, and Ivy wanted to follow, but I gave you some time to yourself. But you must tell me—what is it?"

Alice hadn't realized her conflicted feelings would be so easy to read. She felt a bit ashamed that all the things she thought were confined to her head had escaped and become

visible to the outside world. “Oh, it’s nothing very important. Just a little ...”

How to describe it in a calm, not overblown way? Would her mother be angry that Alice had allowed Kirk to think what he’d thought, even accidentally? Would it get the man in trouble? Alice would never forgive herself if this conversation with her mother cost Kirk his job and, therefore, his family’s livelihood.

Alice gestured to the bed. “Sit down, and I’ll tell you. It’s just that ... You know Mr. Kirk Manning has been working as Papa’s stable manager for these last few months?”

Mother lowered herself onto the edge of the bed. “I recall something to that point, yes.

He told me it was going well. He's a good hand with horses ... or something to that effect."

"You know, then, that we were friends—years ago, before he went to school." She actually wasn't sure that her mother knew this, and she was anxious to hear the response.

"Of course I knew. Since you were both so young, and you hadn't many friends your age, I didn't put up much of a resistance. I must admit, I found it amusing that you thought it was some big secret." Mother cocked her head. "Yet I did not imagine that any sort of a friendship would persist after he went to school. Nor did I think that he would come back to work here. I shall be very sorry

if that causes any problems.”

“No!” Alice hurried to say. “Not problems, exactly. It’s only that ... that he thought our friendship should continue and perhaps even ... deepen.”

Mother nodded. “I see. I can’t honestly say I didn’t expect it, Alice. Your father mentioned he treated you familiarly from the start.”

“Yes. He thought ... he seemed to think that I felt ... that I felt similarly to him on issues of class. That it wouldn’t matter to me, or that I wanted an escape, perhaps. Nothing could be further from the truth! Though I don’t think he’s any less of a man for his poverty and his breeding, I do not think we

would get on well.” She ran a hand over her eyes. “But now I’ve made him angry.”

“Better angry now than broken-hearted later, darling.” Mother patted the bed beside her. “Come here. If that’s really how you feel, you need feel no shame.”

Oh, thank heavens Mother was able to put it in a sharp perspective. “I only hate to think I’ve wounded him—or that ...” She swallowed. “Or that there’s something unwomanly in refusing him.” Especially because of something as fragile as status. Though in England such things felt all-important and set in stone, she was not so naïve as to believe that anything on this earth would last forever.

“No, darling, I don’t think you were! It all boils down to this, however: would having a close relationship to Kirk Manning be what God wants for you?” Mother again repeated her invitation for Alice to sit close to her, and this time Alice took it. Mother linked her arm around Alice’s waist and gave her a quick hug. “God has a plan for you, darling, and He has one man for you. Trust me. Now, that’s not to say that God couldn’t match a girl like you to a boy like Mr. Manning. Why wouldn’t He, if it were best for you both? But, my girl, God is an infinitely sensible Being if He’s anything.”

That was one thing Alice was forever grateful for. She hated the very thought of any sort of emotion being included in her life. Her

mother, of course, would give far more nods to love and passion and all that nonsense than Alice was comfortable with. But Alice was sure God didn't want that for her—of course not! For she would hate it. And anything she would hate that much must be bad for her. Ergo, God couldn't want it for her.

“You just keep waiting and praying, dearest. And if you feel that the right choice was to end your friendship with Mr. Manning, I applaud you for it. As I said, it'll cause less pain for him in the long run.” Mother kissed her cheek. “I love you, and I'm going to do my best to support you through your Season. I feel, with assurance, that you are to have your debut, Alice—I'm sure of it. I think God wants

this for you.”

Did she, really? Alice was never quite that sure of what God wanted. But she trusted her mother deeply, so she simply accepted a final hug and kiss and remained silent.

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Her mother’s reassurances had allowed Alice to sleep through the night, but by morning, a whole new round of doubts and regrets had risen in Alice. More than that, she now felt a measure of guilt she wasn’t comfortable with.

She hated the idea of being responsible for breaking hearts. At school, her fellow

students had spoken casually of exerting their influence over men. They'd been bred for it, and they expected to leave panting men in their wakes wherever they went. Though the primary goal of their lives was matrimony to a proper gentleman, they still longed to catch the eyes, and perhaps the hearts, of every other man they met. They were trained like hunting dogs, ready to sight and devour their prey.

Yet, despite these cold-hearted claims to be seductresses, every one of them had been innocent and most of them also had romantic dreams. Alice sometimes wondered what had happened to the older ones by now—and what would happen to the younger ones in time.

Would they find the mix of romance, daring, and conformity that they dreamed of?

Alice took a more sensible approach, in her mind. She had no intention of hurting anyone. She simply wanted to get in, find one decent man, marry him, and get out. Love didn't matter to her—but she refused to use any of her 'womanly wiles' to charm anyone's heart. For that matter, she refused to be any more charming than one was for the sake of civility.

It seemed even with these safeguards, she'd failed, for Kirk Manning claimed to want her to stay at Pearlbelleville Park for him, which must mean he loved her, which of course meant she would disappoint him. Would his

heart be truly broken? Alice had never fussed over anything more.

It still struck her with shock that he cared for her, especially since he never listened to a word she said. Alice had expected to put up a bit of a fight to secure that particular gentleman, imaginary though he was at present, whom she'd set her cap at.

Alice had no real illusions of grandeur, except to think that with enough persuasion she could convince anyone of anything. *That* she had been able to prove. What she had no proof of was that, without lovely gowns and extravagant hairstyles, she could ever hope to attract a man. She also had no real belief that she was any more accomplished than all the

thousands of other debutantes in London.

She wasn't a stunning beauty like her mother or sister. She also wasn't particularly amusing, particularly good at anything that most young ladies valued, or particularly interesting.

Her family had a bit of a stain on them from a rather interesting past. She had a dowry, but she hoped to secure someone a little better than a fortune hunter. If she'd been a little fairer, she'd have called *herself* a fortune hunter.

So why was Kirk interested in her?

At last she gave up thinking about it and rode down to the gatehouse to see Nettie. She felt certain that was the only way to calm

her wildly spinning thoughts.

The children were outside playing, but Alice was able to slip into the kitchen undetected. Nettie was sitting at the table with a book, and she looked up with a smile when Alice entered the room.

“Alice.” She set the book aside, and her eyes flickered up and then down again. “Hmm.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The chair across the table scraped along the wood floor as Alice pulled it back.

“Kirk Manning?”

Alice sighed as she slumped onto the chair. “Why do you have to know everything?”

“I just have seen a lot more of people than you have—that’s not your fault.” Nettie leaned her elbows on the table. “What did he say to you?”

“That I’m a horrible person.” Alice winced. “That I am prejudiced against him because of his class.”

Nettie raised her eyebrows. “Aren’t you?”

That wasn’t fair! Even if it were true, it wasn’t any truer of her than of thousands of girls like her—including her own mother. “I ...” She sputtered over the word. “Not precisely.”

“No, not precisely. And, Alice, I’m on your side in this. I always will be. But I know

you can be brusque, and I'm sure that you were when he spoke to you." Nettie drummed her fingers against the table, looking ridiculously calm.

Unfortunately, today Nettie's continual cool wasn't affecting Alice like it normally did. Today Alice felt just as upset as she had before she came. She'd just have to talk through it.

She rose. She'd feel better if she could keep moving. "I can't believe he cares about me. He implied that he does—and I can't believe it."

"You're a lovely young woman, and one he was close to in his childhood. His truest friend. Why shouldn't he?"

Alice chuckled ruefully. "Because I'm

me, and Kirk is Kirk. He should know better.”

Nettie smiled. “That’s not generally how love is supposed to work.”

Again, she felt tempted to laugh, though she didn’t. “I thought you said the way people think love should be seldom is accurate.”

“I did say that, but that doesn’t mean that it’s always controllable. Or at least the things that people think are love aren’t obviously controllable. But let’s be reasonable.” Nettie stood and held out her arms. “Come here.”

“I don’t want a hug.”

“Nonsense. Of course you do.”

Alice sighed and stepped across the

kitchen to accept Nettie's embrace, but she pulled back as quickly as she could. She wasn't a child whose injuries could be cuddled away. She was a woman now, with real problems that wouldn't disappear after a hot cup of tea and a good night's sleep.

“Let's talk this through logically. So when did this happen?”

Alice's throat tightened as she once again thought about her conversation with Kirk. She lowered herself back into her seat. “Yesterday. I was in the stables, and we met there. He said my ‘whole rotten class’ has influenced me to be a woman he doesn't even recognize.” Surprisingly, tears started in her eyes. She hadn't thought she was going to cry;

she didn't usually. "Nettie, that's not true."

"No, it's not. He was angry, most likely. Women hurt men's pride more often than their hearts. What else did he say?"

Alice quickly related all she could remember of the conversation. It did help to say it all out loud and to have Nettie nod and acknowledge it all. Nettie always had a way of making everything come together, and, once again, Alice was glad she'd sought her old governess out.

"The first thing I can tell you," Nettie said when Alice had finally gotten all the thoughts she had out of her system, "is to stop and pray. Have you done that?"

Alice tossed her hands up in frustration.

“I’ve tried. I really have! Yet it seems like nothing makes this better. Nettie, what if I’ve broken his heart?”

“This will sound cold, Gracie, but he’s twenty. He has a lot more broken hearts ahead of him. Even if his love was more than a passing infatuation--which it indeed could be as I’ve no doubt that a nice young man like him could feel a great deal for a young woman like you--it is likely that he will recover. God loves and supports him as much as you, remember?”

Alice bit her lip. “Yes, he is a Christian.”

“See? All the better. You’ve only to pray for the continual strengthening of his

relationship with God.” Nettie looked thoughtful. “I’ll have him in my prayers. Both of you! I will pray that God’s will is done in your relationship.”

“I thought you’d say that.” Alice gritted her teeth together and stood, though this time she didn’t pace. “I don’t want to be with him, Nettie. I don’t. I thought at first he might be right, that it was simply my desire to marry well, but I don’t see myself with him. He can’t be what God wants for me!”

“Nevertheless, keep your eyes and your heart open. Please, Alice. You needn’t seek out time with him if you don’t want to. But promise me that if God points you in the direction of any man, whether it is Kirk

Manning or someone else entirely, you will go in that direction without hesitation.”

Alice shrugged. She doubted God would give her an individualized assessment of her situation, but if He did, of course she would listen. It was just that she didn’t usually hear anything specific from Him. “I will.”

“Good. Then I am satisfied.” Nettie sighed. “Alice, the love of a good man is something to be cherished. I don’t know if you fully realize that! I think you have in your head the idea of a sensible marriage, which I do admire. Not many young women your age would be sensible—they would think they are being sensible, as that is what their parents desire for them, but in reality they are looking

for someone handsome, someone charming, someone who will sweep them off their feet as the novels say. Yet you can't discount love, even as you can't make it something mystical and worthy of worship. Love isn't mystical—it's real. It's a practical action that you long to take rather than a fairy-tale feeling, and it's a wondrous gift."

"Yes, of course." Why was the thought of love such a worrisome burden? If only marriages could be the business transaction she'd seen so many people around her engage in—that would be best. Alice wanted to believe it would be best.

Wouldn't it?

"Remember that God is profoundly

sensible—but to us, in the moment, God’s plans don’t always feel as if they are guided by sense. Sometimes they seem quite strange! They seem like a request to walk on water or a building plan for a big boat that’s to be constructed in the middle of a desert. However, in the end, they are profoundly sensible. We can only follow His perfect plans and trust that they will lead us along the right path.”

Again, Alice offered her whole-hearted agreement, but inside, she doubted. If faced with a plan that contained no sense, faced with a life that contained no rhyme or reason, would she really embrace it?

Alice hated feeling weakness within

herself, yet there it was. A moment of doubt. She just had to pray that God offered her only outwardly sensible choices.

For now, she needed a bit of distance to process all she'd said to Nettie—and what she'd heard in return. So she changed the subject. Since it was Nettie, she didn't even bother making the change smooth.

“The maid we hired has turned out quite well. She's efficient and kind, and I so enjoyed her when we went to France to see to my wardrobe.” Alice sat back down at the table. “Of course, as Mother says, she's not *you*. But she is lovely.”

“Oh? I'm glad.” Nettie smiled. “Both of the fact that I will never be replaced in your

mother's heart and of the fact that your maid is working out well. Perhaps it'll be a long-lasting relationship, though if nothing else, you'll give the girl a good reference."

"Yes, true." Alice stood. "I should head back home. I'll see you again before we go to London, but we won't speak privately." She cocked her head. "Any last advice?"

Nettie sighed and rose from her seat. "Nothing shocking. Just trust God, Alice. This will all seem trivial in a few years; I promise you it will. High society is not God—money and position is not God. None of these things even compare to what we can expect from Him."

Alice embraced Nettie. "I know. I'll try

to remember. I love you!”

Nettie gave Alice a tight squeeze. “I love you, too, Gracie.”

Chapter Seven

London, England

A grand carriage met Peter at the train station, and, though the driver gave him a look that indicated he wasn't dressed up to snuff, he was swiftly conveyed to the Ashfield residence. Peter was used to seeing wealth on display—he had a way of making friends from all classes—and he understood how it drove even the servants to judgment of those who didn't possess said wealth. Frankly, though, there was no judgment in his heart for the judgment. He'd come to accept it as part of his

lot.

The Ashfield house—a large brick monstrosity surrounded by dozens just like it—was in the most fashionable neighborhood. The street was filled with evidence of London's upper class. Ladies paraded by, a man or two always accompanying them. Horse hooves and carriage wheels over cobblestone made their own unique melody, and Peter loved it.

Now, granted, there was nothing quite like the country. However, Peter found himself equally at home here. He felt every place he'd ever visited had its poetry, a set of rhyme and rhythm, and how he loved to memorize those verses.

He was happy to play orator, and he

knew he'd be making notes of the feel of this street in his journal that night. There was so much to be said, so many words to apply. How would he ever make use of them all?

He was glad no one could hear his thoughts, but especially the butler, who glared at him under his bushy brows. Peter would feel like a fool if he ever let anyone into the back door of his mind and walk around the kitchen. Because, to Peter, that's where the back door led—to the center of the home where family gathered to eat and talk and share about their day.

More foolishness.

““Better a witty fool than a foolish wit,”” he reminded himself under his breath as he

was ushered into a parlor.

“Yes, sir?”

“Oh, nothing.” He smiled at the footman. “Thank you. I’ll wait here.” Stating the obvious, but the servant might worry that an American would start snooping around the house—who knew? Peter wanted to be as reassuring as possible. Such was his greatest goal and delight in life, to eliminate the worries of others.

The parlor was everything Peter had expected it to be—fashionable, recently decorated, full of delicate-looking chairs and elegant-looking sofas, and entirely spotless, to a degree that made Peter inclined to feel dirty.

The door opened, and a young man

with a shock of dark hair, wearing an immaculate suit, stood in the doorway. “Strauss!” As Peter remembered, Gibson Ashfield’s every word dripped with both charm and enthusiasm, a mixture not often heard in this part of the world. “I’m so glad you’ve made it here safely.”

“Hello, Gibson.” Peter had never adopted the habit of calling other men by their last name, even if they weren’t particularly close to him. It just didn’t seem personable. “Yes, my journey was quite uneventful. Thank you for—”

“Oh, never mind your thanks.” Gibson grinned and jerked his head to the door. “Let’s go to your room so you can settle in before

dinner. The servants should have taken your things up.”

It was just like Gibson Ashfield to insist he didn't want to hear innumerable 'thank yous.' Nevertheless, Peter couldn't be so easily thwarted. “That sounds wonderful! But I do want to—”

“If you try to offer your thanks again, I really will throw you out the door.” Gibson strode back from whence he'd arrived. “Coming?” he called over his shoulder.

Peter scurried after him. Fine, he'd leave it for later. Perhaps he'd talk to Gibson's parents, the true owners of the house and, therefore, the true extenders of hospitality, on the subject.

He followed Gibson up the broad staircase that spiraled up from the foyer, Gibson's pace quick and efficient, but somehow Peter still felt the leisure in his air. The man didn't need to go anywhere in a hurry; he simply chose to. It was his personality, not his need to fight for life, that kept him moving.

“My parents won't meet you for a bit—they're both terribly busy.” He reached the top step. “Our annual masquerade ball is the day after tomorrow, and of course Mother has a thousand and one things to do. I never know what Father is up to, but he always seems busy.”

There it was again. That tug at Peter's

heart that told him all was not right in the house of Ashfield. The family seemed distant, in the way Gibson's emotions were. There was a heavy layer of something intense hanging over the residence that created an absence of home life and an excess of depression.

Peter had only been here ten minutes, yes, but he'd taught himself to notice such things, and there it was—the dimness.

“I understand how busy they must be,” Peter replied simply. “Such big events seem to take all the energy out of people.” Even his sister's wedding had been quite labor-intensive for all involved, and it'd been a small affair. “Will they have a lot of guests?”

“Oh, hundreds.” Gibson dismissed those

many attendees with a wave of his hand. “I don’t know a quarter of them. Isn’t that marvelous?” His voice was laced with sarcasm.

That was another interesting thing about Gibson Ashfield—his honesty. Gibson then slowed his pace as they walked down the hall, describing with flair the costumes, the hidden drama, the dancing, the entertainment, and the infamous punch—“A man like you would probably avoid it, Strauss.”

Of course, of all things, Gibson remembered that Peter was a teetotaler. But he didn’t give Peter a chance to respond, either; he simply kept the conversation rolling at lightning speed, an endless soliloquy of quick-witted descriptions.

They stopped in front of an open door, and Gibson motioned Peter in. He stepped into a large chamber with all the trimmings and trappings of extravagant wealth. Then something horrible happened—Gibson’s latest sentence ended with a questioning lift.

Peter blinked. “What was that?”

Gibson chuckled. “Not listening already, Strauss? Oh well. I just asked if you liked the room.”

“I do! I’m sorry.” He felt himself flushing and shook his head ruefully. “‘I would my horse had the speed of your tongue,’ to quote the bard, but my mind certainly doesn’t.”

Gibson leaned against the doorframe

and shrugged. “Never mind that. I don’t get someone willing to listen often, whether or not the words actually penetrate.”

How sad. “Then I’m glad I’m here.” One thing Peter could do was listen. And usually he was quite attentive. It just so happened that being grounded in his surroundings tended to make him lose his ability to experience a conscious thought, and that meant his ears stopped delivering the proper signals to his mind.

“Hmm. Well. It’ll be interesting. I like having a novelty, and you are that.” He smiled. “Get settled in. I’ll send my valet over in case you need anything, and if he talks down to you, ignore him. He does it to me,

too.”

Peter restrained a chuckle. He doubted the disrespect Gibson’s valet showed him would be in any way comparable to the disrespect he showed Peter. If it were, it would simply be another fascinating case-study. “Thank you. I’m sure I won’t need anything, though. This room will do just fine.”

“Good, good. I’ll leave you, then.”

After Gibson had disappeared, Peter turned to his satchel; removed his Bible, pens, and current notebook; and set them on the small desk in the corner.

Yes, this would do very nicely. It’d be a lovely place to return after he was done with his daily observations and make some notes

and simply be alone. Hopefully the servants wouldn't prove too intrusive.

And, in the meantime, he could devote his days to observing the Ashfields and the rest of London. Perhaps he'd even be able to help someone.

It would all be marvelously distracting, and he couldn't wait. Then there would be Miss Knight. She'd be debuting soon, too. He wondered as he unpacked if she might cross paths with Gibson Ashfield on her own, but he doubted they'd run in the same circles.

Still, London's high society wasn't a giant group. He hoped she would avoid the Ashfields. The last thing Miss Knight needed was another broken person to worry about.

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“Alice!” Aunt Lois folded her into an exuberant, perfume-laden embrace. “How long it’s been! Look how lovely you are.”

Alice sighed but didn’t try to resist. Her uncle’s wife was absolutely unstoppable, and she took her aunt-ing duties quite seriously. In these next few weeks, her aunt would be even more involved in her life.

Heaven help Alice’s patience. If both of them, as well as Alice’s uncle Charlie, came out of it sane, that would be a miracle.

“Alice.” At least she could rely on her mother’s brother to be calm and relaxed in the

face of any situation. She stepped around Aunt Lois to hug him.

Alice, her parents, and Ivy had only just arrived at their London house, and of course her aunt had immediately chosen to descend upon them. Uncle Charlie and Aunt Lois had a home here, too, though they spent more time at their estate in Yorkshire.

“Of course we brought Geoffrey—” Aunt Lois turned, and her eyes widened as if she was worried that she’d lost her own child. “I let Posy hold him.”

“Which of course means we have Posy with us,” Uncle Charlie said. “She’s in the carriage holding Geoff. I’ll never understand what it is with little girls and small children.

They actually like them.”

“It’s because he’s so precious.” Aunt Lois turned. “We didn’t really mean to visit, though—Charlie says we must wait until you’re settled.”

Mother stepped forward then and embraced her brother. “It’s no inconvenience. Call Posy in—I haven’t seen her or Geoff in over a year. How are you, Charlie, dear?”

“As well as any man with two children running about his household can be,” Uncle Charlie replied, but Alice knew her uncle’s continual grouching had little to do with his happiness.

They returned to their carriage for the children, and in no time, they were settled in

the drawing room.

Posy Parker was the daughter of Aunt Lois's sister, Lydia Elton Parker, and her cousin, Steven Parker, who was also Papa's first cousin. The relationships in Alice's family were complicated, and no one was more complicated than Mr. Parker. In the last few years, he had stopped living off the generosity of Alice's father, having inherited a small fortune from a great-aunt, which meant he no longer spent time at Pearlbelleville Park.

Since his father's death around the same time, he'd also become the sole caretaker of his daughter. However, Mr. Parker didn't want anything to do with Posy—Alice had heard he blamed her for his wife's death—so

Aunt Lois and Uncle Charlie had taken her in.

Apparently, Posy had settled in well. She was an exuberant child, bubbling over with enthusiasm from the moment she entered with Uncle Charlie's son, Geoffrey, by the hand.

Mother, of course, took Geoffrey and cooed over him, making occasional comments to Uncle Charlie and Posy, while Aunt Lois and Alice settled on the sofa to discuss Alice's debut.

"It's not really as frightening as it seems," Aunt Lois said. "Yes, it is a bit frightening, but I remember how it all went—you walk in, you bow, you're ridiculously nervous, and then you back out. The waiting is

the hardest part. We'll practice, of course—"

Aunt Lois rattled on about Alice's presentation. Since, almost twenty years ago, she had been presented at court, she was both qualified—and the only available candidate—to be Alice's "sponsor."

Presentation at court was, in Alice's opinion, far too complicated to be bothered with, but her mother had insisted that since they had the option, they ought to take it.

At last, Mother tired of Geoffrey and Posy, or at least to the point where she could think of something else, and turned her attention to Alice and Aunt Lois. "How strange is it, Lois—I feel as if the entire world has changed in all of twenty years. To think that

simply being the daughter of a country squire allows you to be presented at court.”

Aunt Lois raised her eyebrows. “With the proper name and financial backing, yes. The Eltons were peerage so recently that I was able to be presented twenty years ago, and now, it’s not surprising for girls like Alice. I’m not at all shocked we secured the appointment.”

Mother chuckled. “*I* am. I’m glad, though, as it’ll provide Alice with so many additional opportunities—and many of her schoolmates will be presented. But don’t remind me that it’s been almost twenty years since I was a debutante.”

Aunt Lois sighed. “Oh, don’t remind

me, either!”

“Now, we’re not all going to start reminiscing about how old we are, especially since we aren’t.” Uncle Charlie stood with his son in his arms. Alice had to smother a smile—it was so strange to see Uncle Charlie with such a small child, not even holding him at an odd angle or with a sense of disgust. It was clear he loved Geoffrey.

“Oh, all right.” Aunt Lois tossed her hand in a dismissive gesture. “But we can’t leave quite yet. We’ve got to see Ivy and Philip first.”

“Uncle Charlie?” Ivy stood in the doorway, eyes wide.

“There she is. I don’t care about Philip.”

Uncle Charlie transferred Geoffrey back to
Posy and held his arms out for Ivy. “My girl.”

Chapter Eight

April 6, 1880

London, England

They had waited for hours, first in their carriage and later in the outer rooms, but at last it was almost time for Alice's presentation at court. Aunt Lois passed her card and Alice's as well as their official invitation to one of the stiff, uniformed attendants.

Anxiety wasn't something Alice gave in to often. Or rather, she rarely termed any feeling she had as anxiety. Even when her stomach twisted and her breath came in short

pants, she preferred to blame a worrisome menu item or an overly tight corset, regardless of the fact that her corset was never overly tight—her mother would never allow her to wear a poorly fitted clothing item. Not that she didn't often worry about things, but that she didn't want to say those worries gave her butterflies. She was far too serious to indulge in anything so frolicsome as that.

Yet today she was nervous. Nervous because this was the climax of her life up to this point, and if she stumbled, she would go down in history for it—or at least she imagined she would go down in history for it.

It had started early this morning with a bath, with her skin being rubbed until it

practically glowed, with countless glances in the mirror for fear her face would break out or her eyes might have shadows under them from a near-sleepless night.

Or anything. Anything of the sort could go wrong. Alice was keenly aware of this fact—her mother even more so.

Mother had been absolutely manic this morning. A bit of a smile flickered across Alice's face, serious though the moment was, at the memory. Of course, Alice didn't blame her. She felt badly that her mother couldn't be the one presenting her, honestly. She wished traditions weren't as they were.

As it was, having not been presented at court herself, Mother wasn't able to present

Alice. Thank goodness for Aunt Lois or it might not have been possible, and Mother would have been so disappointed.

Though, Alice had a few connections. Her best friend, Cassie—also known as Lady Mary Cassidy O’Connell—was the daughter of the Earl and Countess of Auburn, and Alice imagined she might have been allowed to be presented alongside Cassie. Thankfully, though, that hadn’t been necessary.

Alice swallowed and adjusted her long train on her arm. It was a cumbersome thing, but six feet of white silk, satin, and tulle was a requirement, as was the elaborate headdress, topped with three large white feathers.

She felt a bit like a peacock, though

with the color, a swan was more apt a description. *Let me glide like a swan, not limp like a penguin, Lord. I only get to do this once.*

Alice had practiced her walk, her bow, the sweeping movement that should be awkward but mustn't be, which she would use to collect her long train in preparation to back out of the chamber. Practiced it until surely she couldn't make a mistake. *My family is already on the outskirts of society, at least in this crowd. What if ...?*

Aunt Lois turned to her, thankfully interrupting her anxious thoughts. "We've only a bit longer to wait, darling. Three girls ahead of you. Oh, don't you look lovely!"

Her aunt had said that only three dozen

times since she'd come to collect her in the early afternoon, but Alice still appreciated the reassurance. She ought to look lovely after all the effort her mother, her maid, and the dressmaker had put out. This was the loveliest Alice could be made to look. The gown was the height of fashion, made by the most popular modiste in Paris specifically for this occasion.

Likely the only time she'd ever wear it again would be for her wedding, though with a different bodice—probably one a bit higher. Strange how a lower neckline was acceptable for presentation at court but not in general. It almost made Alice wonder if the rules weren't a bit arbitrary, without any real reason for

their existence.

But thinking of dresses held not half the appeal of thinking of matrimony, and her thoughts quickly wandered away from that vein. Hopefully Alice's wedding wouldn't be too far away. Hopefully this appearance, combined with similar appearances that would surely follow, would allow her to secure a good match—soon.

Two more girls to go. Aunt Lois squeezed Alice's hand. Unlike Mother, Aunt Lois's anxiety wasn't quite so covered by bluster—she showed her fears, but never seemed to linger on them long. There was more excitement in Aunt Lois for Alice than there ever would be in Mother. Mother saw

the possibilities of disaster—Aunt Lois saw a great deal more fun.

Alice didn't find it fun, but her nerves were not quite as tightly strung as her mother's, either. She felt it was important, but she also wasn't particularly interested in the society parade that was the Season. Yet she would do it, because she had been raised to believe it was as vital as breathing—and just as natural, too.

Then it was time, and Alice glided forward with her train and veil trailing behind her. She turned her brain off and moved forward, one leg placed gently in front of the other, her eyes slightly downcast but not so downcast as to render her incapable of seeing

where she was walking.

The throne room was practically a wide hall lined with various courtesans and noblemen and women here to observe the latest debutantes. Alice caught sight of banners and crests out of the corners of her eyes, but she just knew she'd fall flat on her face if she tried to observe everything, so she resisted.

When it came to her day-to-day opinions, Alice was as unimpressed by the queen as she had been by every hereditary monarch in every kingdom throughout every era of the world. However, today, awe filled Alice as she approached the throne placed in the grand receiving chamber.

‘Throne’ seemed so ancient a word for the modern-day world. Yet here Alice was in a throne room, and it all felt very strange and foreign.

As if living out a dream, she caught the eye of Queen Victoria, who looked both serious and bored at the same time. The queen wasn’t a particularly beautiful woman, nor particularly intimidating, nor dressed in the grandest fashion with her typical dark ensemble lending a sober air to her entire countenance.

A moment or so, and Alice looked down again, as if some invisible force compelled her. She approached, took the offered hand and kissed it, and bowed until her knee almost but

not quite touched the floor.

Then she rose, every muscle in her body straining for that seamless, effortless motion, and gathered her train over her arm.

It was over. She backed up, eyes still lowered, knowing that if she dared to turn her back on the queen, she would risk the wrath of everyone who heard tell—and they would hear. Society always heard what one didn't want to be heard. She'd learned that early in her life.

At last she was back with her aunt, and all the breath left her body. She just wanted to sit down, and yet, at the same time, a strange numbness continued.

She had prepared for those few minutes

for months. The gown had cost a fortune. The time it had taken to learn the court bow, to collect her train, and to back out of the room ... All for *that*.

Then, with a heavy weight on her shoulders, Alice realized the significance. For an earl's daughter like Cassie, this was simply another small ritual that confirmed she was now available for matrimony. Cassie had always been a member of the peerage, and she always would be.

For Alice, however, it was a big step. It said she was more than the daughter of a middle-class dressmaker. It said she was more than the daughter of a wealthy man with a country home and a thousand other

meaningless things, struggling to find a foothold in a society that catered only to the royalty of England.

Miss Alice Knight had appeared before the queen. She had been acknowledged on the same level as an earl's daughter—in the same way a duchess would be honored. She had been given equal footing.

Miss Alice Knight was, therefore, someone of distinction. Someone worthy of being pursued. Someone who would and could find a match that would put her in a position of influence, of control.

Oh, how lovely to be in control! That was the epitome of womanhood, wasn't it? It must be. So few women had control. Yet, in

England today, there was a woman on the throne and likely would be for some time. In England today, ladies of status held power under their husbands—and sometimes without them—that many men failed to grasp.

Today, in England, Alice could be such a woman. She could have control. She would never be at anyone's mercy—and, therefore, neither would anyone she loved. She would protect them as no one else did.

She followed Aunt Lois numbly back to the carriage as these thoughts flooded her brain, and she spoke little as her aunt prattled on about this and that. Now Aunt Lois was trying to think of a way to convince 'Charlie' to have another baby because, "If it's a girl, I

could go through it all again in twenty years or so.” She followed this with vivid descriptions of how much fun it would be to have a daughter like Alice.

Alice rolled her eyes. Good luck with that. Uncle Charlie was a man who Alice adored, but in that moment, adrenaline still coursing through her veins, she saw that his influence over Aunt Lois’s life meant that she had few options.

However, Alice would never be like that. Her options would be numerous in every way. She would always make it be so. She’d find a way to make it so. The keys had been given to her—that life seemed to brush at the fingertips of her soul, and she reached, and

she felt her fingers begin to grasp at the edges.

Alice would be in control, and no one would ever make her suffer.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

“Alice!” Cassie rushed over and took her hands as soon as Alice entered the O’Connell’s ballroom. “I’m so glad you’ve come.”

Alice glanced about the grand area behind Cassie before returning her eyes to her friend. “Of course I came! My, you look lovely.” She’d thought it was impossible, but somehow Cassie’s simple debut gown looked more expensive than Alice’s. “I love your

hair.”

Cassie touched it lightly with her fingertips and winced. “I feel like the way it’s arranged makes it stand out too much, but thank you. You look absolutely lovely, too! That dress is so flattering.”

“Thank you.” For once, Alice agreed with her. There was something ethereal about these white dresses with the long trains, all so carefully designed to meet court specifications. Every debutante she’d seen looked like an angel. That must be the intended effect.

“You will greet my guests with me?” Cassie linked her arm through Alice’s before she had a chance to protest. “Mother wanted me to invite Lord Dalbury’s daughter, but I

wouldn't have it."

"Of course! I promised to, didn't I?"

Cassie was always a bundle of shy nerves, and this entire process of becoming a debutante had been hard on her. Her letters had shown increasing levels of stress, and her cheeks were bright red and her pupils slightly dilated even now.

It wasn't all Cassie's fault, either. Lady Auburn, Cassie's mother, was a severe woman, who was never satisfied with her youngest. Alice had often threatened in her letters of late to give Lady Auburn a piece of her mind should they meet.

Would she really dare? Never. But it didn't sit well with her to see her childhood

friend abused. It never had, and Cassie was so easy to bully.

Soon it was time for the other guests to begin arriving, and Alice took her place beside her friend. Though Cassie seemed to think that Alice was doing her a great favor, really it was quite the opposite. Cassie's friendship would go a long way toward Alice's having a successful Season. Her favor would tell others that Alice was worth notice.

Yes, Cassie might be the youngest, smallest daughter of the Earl of Auburn. Yes, she might be a redheaded half-Irish girl with a smattering of freckles and a too-wide grin—in her own estimation, not in Alice's, who knew her friend to be lovely.

And, yes, Cassie was prone to nervousness, with a trace of a country accent. Her mother had neglected Cassie's education, more focused on her own pursuits, meaning that, until she'd been sent to the same boarding school Alice had gone to, Cassie had lived in the Irish countryside, doing much as she pleased.

However, now Cassie was a lady—more so than Alice, for she was a lady by title as well as manners. Everyone here referred to her as Lady Mary, her actual name, and offered her as much respect and admiration as she deserved, not knowing of her secret fears and overly-active humility.

That meant that Cassie's influence was,

therefore, immeasurable. Alice would insist upon thanking her, again and again, for these favors, even if Cassie didn't realize what favors they were.

All the guests were greeted, and they proceeded into the ballroom. It was decorated with lanterns and lace and ribbons, almost to an excess. Certainly the various people there, all dressed in their greatest finery, made everything about themselves seem excessive, from their laughter to their chatter to their outfits.

The rest of the evening passed in a whirl, as Alice had been told debut balls often did. Cassie had planned hers the night of her debut, knowing that people would come

despite the busyness. Alice's was delayed for a few weeks, so she was given the opportunity to take mental notes for how to conduct herself at her own event.

Of course, Alice was now 'out.' She was now a debutante; she had now entered the marriage market. It might be that by the time her debutante ball came around, she'd have already met and become seriously involved with her future husband.

Cassie certainly was getting plenty of attention, and so was Alice, if only to please Cassie. The men were swarming, as were the other debutantes and the mothers. Poor Cassie looked slightly overwhelmed, if happy that she wasn't being ignored. It had been one of her

greatest fears, silly as it was.

For, no, Cassie would not be ignored. She was too rich, too titled, and too sweet to be ignored. Her fears only stemmed from what she'd experienced from her family, not from the reality of society's opinion of her. Society would love Cassie, for she was the quiet, demure, lovely daughter of an earl that they expected.

Though, there was more to Cassie than that of course. She was a musician, with a wonderful voice, and she was a quick thinker and a kinder friend. Though easily flustered, she'd started to grow out of that. She would doubtless make one of these overly talkative men very happy.

Security for both her friend and herself hummed at the back of Alice's conscious, a happy thought. They would both be all right.

Her mind harkened back to years ago, when they'd whispered long into the night at Miss Selle's Boarding School for Girls, talking about and fearing for their futures.

Neither had imagined today. Neither had prepared themselves for the inevitable—or at least for Cassie, it had always been inevitable.

Now here they were. Now they would be safe.

Alice reached, and she grasped, and she climbed.

Chapter Nine

April 8, 1880

Alice arched her eyebrows and leaned back on her chair, her teacup cradled in her hands. “I really think that you’re making this a great deal more than it is, but, no, go on.”

Cassie laughed. “I won’t, if you’re going to be so negative about it.” She giggled. “But we’ve not much to talk about if we don’t discuss men. I’ve been led to believe that that’s what we’re supposed to think about, speak about, and live for.”

“Indeed.” Alice agreed, of course, that

finding a man was their primary occupation, but that didn't mean she intended to be silly about it. "You just have such an emotional way of seeing these things, Cass."

"I know." Cassie played with the sleeves of her gown. "Of course, you have such a strictly unemotional way of seeing these things, dear, that I worry you won't be truly happy, because, from a logical perspective, there is no such thing as a perfect man, and—"

"We both know how we feel about romance, so let's not argue about it."

"I can't help it." Cassie stood and walked over to her vanity. "I feel like I need to warn you before you follow your head into a loveless marriage and end up miserable. I love

you, Alice—if you are happy, I shall be happy. But you're right; we won't agree. We must both learn, I suppose, what paths should be taken. Someday, when we're aged dowagers, we'll look back and laugh and wish the young ones would take our sage advice.”

Alice hoped that was true. Those days seemed so far away, and yet so much to be desired. Not that she wanted to be near death's door and accompanied by all the sound wisdom thereof, but that she wanted to be regarded as wise. She wanted people to believe her words held impact—and that she was mature.

Cassie traced her fingers along a diamond necklace she'd left on the table from

the night before. “Mother gave me this last night. Family heirloom. I doubted I’d get any, but you know Mother. She gave it to me so casually.”

Yes, Lady Auburn wasn’t known for her affectionate nature, especially to her youngest daughter. Apparently, Cassie’s older sister was everything Cassie wasn’t—calm, confident, graceful. Deserving of the family jewels.

Or perhaps that was just how Cassie, humble to a fault and at times a bit petty, presented matters. Alice only knew her friend’s perspective but was inclined to believe her based on what she’d seen of the countess.

Alice set her cup aside and rose to join Cassie by the vanity. “Lovely. It has the look

of something that's been in the family for generations."

"Yes. My great-grandmother's or something like that." Cassie smiled. "I didn't know my father's grandparents, or even his parents, so it's nice to have a link to them, small though it may be."

She had a castle, technically, but the O'Connells had been trying to remove their unpleasant Irish association for years. They always married English women and lived in London or thereabouts rather than at their castle in County Kerry, removing themselves as far as possible from their heritage. Cassie had little hope for ever returning to Ireland for good, but she spoke with longing of misty

moors and crashing waves and a castle that she called home perched on top of a hill.

Since Cassie's mother had been unwell after she was born, Cassie had spent the first several years of her life in Ireland and continued to spend much of her time there even after Lady Auburn returned to London. So, to Cassie, County Kerry was home. England was simply the place she was dragged to learn proper manners and seek a match with a man she knew would only look on her Irish blood with disdain.

Alice supposed she could understand Cassie's apprehension in that way. She, too, feared that her future husband would look at her family and their past with revulsion. She

wouldn't be able to bear it if he hated her mother or Nettie.

“No one's stood out yet?” Alice asked. “You were quite surrounded at your ball. Did anyone leave a serious impression on you?”

Cassie offered a slight smile. “There was ... I suppose it's too early to know anything, and you can't really get to know someone in a ballroom. The press is too much. But I've had a scattering of callers.”

So there had been someone who made an impression on her. “Who was it?”

She blushed. “His name is Mr. Aubrey Montgomery. You met him at my ball—he was tall, and he has blond hair.”

“I think I remember something about

him.” Alice raised her eyebrows. “He’s untitled, though. Wouldn’t your mother disapprove of the attachment?”

“No. He has enough money, and—” Cassie stopped herself, then sighed and pushed through. “She’s made it clear that her expectations for me are not very high.”

“Right.” Perhaps Alice would give Lady Auburn a piece of her mind, after all. “What is the man like?”

Poor Cassie’s face must hurt from all that flushing. “He’s nice. Very kind! He has two younger sisters, and he promised to see me at the Ashfields’ masquerade ball. I told him I’d be wearing a blue dress with a matching mask, and he said he’d doubtless be

able to find me. I suppose he's a dear friend of the Ashfields' son."

"He is?" That made sense. The Ashfields were one of the most influential families in London, and Cassie's mother wouldn't object to the courtship of anyone closely associated with them, regardless of their lack of title. "I see. I hope that goes well for you. Do you know anything of his character?" she asked by rote. Nettie must have taught her at least a few lessons well.

"Only that everyone speaks quite highly of it, and that he seems all he should be. I'll stay back until I am sure of him." Cassie laughed. "As if I could be anything but cautious!"

“Of course.” She trusted her friend to be that, but they both needed a reminder from time to time. Logic first, then emotion, if emotion was to be included. Cassie would try to include emotion, and, therefore, her dose of logic must be all the greater.

“There’s no one you’re interested in, then? From the ball or ... Have you had callers?” Cassie’s eyes zeroed in on Alice, and she had a feeling that her friend intended to read even the slightest evidence of attachment in her face. That was fair; Alice would avoid being upfront with her thoughts on any given man until she was sure.

“No one. I had a few gentlemen callers, but mostly friends of the family and such. I’ve

entertained quite a few ladies for tea in the last two days. I'll have to rush home, actually." Alice hadn't expected so much of the 'finding a man' process to involve simpering to older women. She disliked it greatly. "But, no. There's no one yet. I imagine it'll take a few weeks."

"Or less," Cassie hastened to say, her eyes full of that tender anxiety Alice had become so familiar with throughout their youth. "Much less! I can't imagine that every gentleman in London won't line up outside your door as soon as they discover you."

Alice rolled her eyes. "I should have you speak to them on my behalf, now, shouldn't I? I'd be married in a fortnight. You

forget that you're the titled lady with a large dowry and family connections with nearly every eligible gentleman in London—and I'm just Alice Knight."

"*Just!*" Cassie's voice held all the scorn for the word that a single creature could rightfully possess. "Nonsense. You're Alice, and that in itself is enough to recommend you."

"A stunning recommendation. Perhaps I should have it printed." She placed her hand on top of Cassie's and squeezed. "You're a dear friend to me, Cassie."

"Thank you. And you to me."

Alice left Cassie's room behind and returned to her carriage, where she was

promptly taken home for tea.

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Alice turned to the mirror and gasped. Was the girl in the mirror really her? She scarcely recognized herself. Her dress was simply gorgeous.

Still, there was only so far she could go in terms of complimenting herself, so she tried to be vague. “It suits me, doesn’t it?”

The navy-blue creation, trimmed with cream-colored ruffles and ribbons, was flattering to the point of dishonesty in Alice’s opinion, but she wasn’t going to complain. Not tonight.

“Yes, it suits you.” Mother smiled at her reflection. “I’m glad we chose that shade of blue in the end. I wasn’t sure at first. It’s a dark color, but I was right. It improves your complexion, and your hair and eyes both seem to glow.”

“I can’t answer for my hair, but that ‘glow’ in my eyes is nervousness.” She could see a somewhat wobbly smile in the mirror and glanced down to hide it.

“There’s no reason to be nervous.” Mother placed an affectionate hand on Alice’s shoulder. “Now, let your maid do your hair. I have to dress myself.”

Alice sat down on the chair in front of her vanity and sat rigidly still while her maid

twisted and tugged her raven locks into order.

“I think you look beautiful,” Ivy said, rising from the chair by the fire where she’d been sitting.

“Why, thank you, Ivy, but you always say that,” Alice said, glancing at her sister. Ivy was classically beautiful with long, golden locks and big blue eyes. Her skin was ivory white, her body small but filled out, perfectly rounded. Unlike Alice, who still felt she was all angles.

Her maid at last finished with her hair, and Alice breathed a deep sigh. “Thank you. That looks very nice. You may go now; I can manage the mask.”

The maid bobbed a curtsey and left the

room.

“Only I think I’m going to develop a headache from carrying all this hair piled up so high,” Alice added as the door closed.

Ivy giggled. “Do you think so?”

“I do think so. But it won’t matter too much. My head was spinning before the maid touched my hair. This is a very important event for me, Ivy.”

“Do you think you’ll meet the man you’re going to marry?” Ivy asked, eyes dreamy. She had little hope of marriage from what Alice could tell, and she seemed to have romanticized her sister’s journey to find her ‘prince.’ Alice smiled and shook her head in amusement.

“Perhaps. I might, but it could take a while for me to find him, and even then, I don’t expect ‘love at first sight.’ No immediate recognition that he’s ‘the one.’ I don’t expect love at all, to be honest. There’s no time for it.”

Ivy sighed and took a seat on the edge of Alice’s bed. “But you want to be happy, don’t you?” She’d made it clear she didn’t particularly approve of Alice’s tactics for attaining a proper match. Probably, Alice thought, because she’d read too many novels.

“Yes, I do, but more than anything, I want to marry a man who I like, and who our parents like.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, unsure if she should confide her

full thoughts to Ivy. “I ... I hear from Nettie of midnight rendezvous years ago that don’t sound like Mother. I want to maintain a rational state of mind when I marry. After all, it is one of the most important decisions of my life.”

“I don’t think love is really blind, as they always say,” Ivy said. “I think it just sees its object in a new light.”

“I can’t take the risk. I have a plan, remember?” She stood and smoothed her skirts, setting her resolve once again. She had outlined her life, and she must not leave the predestined path behind.

“But maybe your plan isn’t the right one.” Her tone was tense and worried.

Alice squeezed her sister's shoulder. "I'm sure it is." She picked up a small watch pin from the vanity and glanced at the face. Almost time to leave. "Wish me luck."

Ivy cocked her head. "We don't believe in luck."

As always, so particular about phrasing. "I mean pray, darling, of course. Good night. I'll tell you all about it in the morning." She kissed her sister's cheek and turned. At the doorway, she glanced over her shoulder as she adjusted her small wrist bag. "I do appreciate those prayers, though, Ivy. This makes me nervous because ... It's a masquerade ball at the Ashfields'. They are well known for their scandals. It's reputable only because most of

the guests are reputable, but your behavior determines the outcome. I worry about falling in with the wrong people.”

Ivy nodded. “I see.”

“I’m sure it’ll be all right, though. Don’t tell Mother all that—I’m not sure she knows the details.”

Her sister winced slightly, but Alice knew she wouldn’t say a thing. She mouthed *thank you* as she stepped out of the door.

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The Ashfields’ home was all aglow with lights that night. A line of carriages slowly rolled past the front entrance, and women in

extravagant dresses and men in smartly tailored suits stepped down. It was a grand sight, and though Alice kept a cool exterior, inside she was trembling with excitement.

When the Knights' carriage jerked to a stop, Alice accepted a hand down from a stoic footman and followed her parents up the steps and through the door.

Just inside, the Ashfields greeted their guests.

There was Mr. Jeremy Ashfield, a tall, dark-haired man with a delicate nose and mouth that contrasted pleasantly with his more manly countenance. His wife, Mrs. Ashfield, wasn't exactly beautiful, but she had a pleasant, round face. Both had removed

their masks while greeting their guests, perhaps their way of making the affair more civilized.

Their son wasn't standing with them, and Alice imagined that a young man like him—he was a few years older than her but still young—wanted to embrace the air of mystery that came with the masquerade ball.

Alice actually could understand that, though she couldn't respect it. There was something exciting about wearing a mask, about not being sure who anyone was. Not that she knew a great many people anyway; it was more the principle of the thing that lent to the excitement.

She imagined Mr. Ashfield felt the same

way. Only he probably didn't pair these feelings with a healthy dose of self-annoyance for finding any excitement in something so childish as wearing a mask and dancing with strangers.

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Peter stood up on the balls of his feet, then dropped down. He stood toward the head of the ballroom with Gibson and his friend Aubrey Montgomery. The two younger men were talking quietly to each other while Peter observed the whirling finery of the crowd before him.

Peter reached up to adjust his mask,

which, from time to time, took to itching. His problems with it, however, were as much psychological as physical.

There was something wrong with covering any part of one's face—dehumanizing, a removal of his personhood and therefore his ability to empathize and be empathized with. He could only imagine the issues it would cause if people wore something like these masks all the time. It took away a part of his individuality, and he didn't like it.

Still, for an evening, to fit into Gibson's theme, he'd do so. He took a step toward his benefactor and his friend.

“Lady Mary Cassidy O'Connell.” Gibson said the name as someone who had never

heard it before and was testing it out. “I know of her family, but I don’t think I’ve heard much about her. First Season?”

“Yes.” Mr. Montgomery smiled. “Sweet girl. Quite lovely. I think she’s been in the country a great deal, which is why you haven’t heard of her.”

“And I don’t spend a great deal of time with little girls—which debutantes inevitably are, no matter what their mothers tell you,” Gibson said. He glanced at Peter. “This is the lady Monty wants to court. His mother has been pressuring him to marry, especially now that his father has passed away.”

Peter glanced at Mr. Montgomery. He seemed like a firm, steady man, certainly a

great deal more serious and grounded than Gibson. He also didn't seem the type to be overly influenced by his mother.

"That's only part of the story." He shrugged and rolled his shoulders, shifted from foot to foot. Bashful. His father's recent death meant that he was suddenly the man of the house. Perhaps there were a lot of pressures to be dealt with in that. "I simply want someone to ...". He glanced around. He had wanted someone to share his life with or something along those lines; it was in his tone. "I want to marry."

"Can't say I understand." Gibson took a sip of his punch. "At least tell me she's pretty."

"She is, but that's not really the primary

quality, no matter what you say.” Mr. Montgomery glanced at Peter. “What say you, Mr. Strauss?”

“I think different people have different priorities when it comes to choosing a wife.” Peter cleared his throat. “But, no, I would not place beauty at the top of the list. I don’t believe it would even make the list, if there was one.”

“I wouldn’t, either, though I might be swayed by some less romantic considerations.” His eyes scanned the room, plainly searching for the lady in question. “Family, for instance, and fortune. But I don’t have to worry about any of that with her, given that she’s an earl’s daughter. It can all come down to her

character in this case.”

“I think that’s the best way. To make a choice based on who she is, not *what* she is, if you will.” At least that was the best way Peter could think to phrase it.

Mr. Montgomery chuckled. “Yes. Perhaps.”

“To quote one of Strauss’s favorite writers, ‘Some Cupid kills with arrows, some with traps.’” Gibson grinned, his cheeks pressing his mask upwards. As he reached up to adjust it, he continued his thoughts. “I can’t imagine getting married at my age. Twenty-three is far too young for a man to settle, Monty, and you ought to know better. But all that aside, this whole scheme of debutantes

and dances is a trap, and we'd all do well to avoid it."

"Well—" Mr. Montgomery began, but before he could finish, Gibson held up his hand.

"I see someone I wanted a word with. Don't mind if I leave you two to your antisocial pillar imitating, do you?"

Mr. Montgomery followed Gibson's gaze even as Peter did. A lovely lady in a scarlet dress, her blonde hair piled high and her sparkly mask catching the light of the chandeliers far above them. Ah. For some reason, the lady in red seemed exactly Gibson's type. He couldn't explain why; she just was.

“Go on, then. I imagine you’ve arranged half a dozen little meetings for tonight.” There was scorn in Montgomery’s tone, scorn that Peter wouldn’t dare express to even his dearest friend. No, he’d try a gentler approach.

Gibson didn’t seem offended, however. “So judgmental, Monty—so judgmental! Strauss would never speak to me that way. But nevertheless, I must leave to meet with more ... *entertaining* ... guests.”

Peter sighed as Gibson walked off in the direction of the lady in red. He reached her, and Peter caught sight of her smile and laughing response to whatever he said before they disappeared through the crowd.

Mr. Montgomery cleared his throat. “I

hope you don't think I approve of him."

"Oh?" Generally friendship was a small mark of approval. Not that Peter's friends were angels—quite the opposite. But he'd been born with his friends.

"No. I don't. We've been friends since we were in school, and I do care about him—he's like a brother to me, and a brother to my sisters, too. I trust him with them, but I'll frankly say I wouldn't trust him with any other lady of my acquaintance."

"I see." Peter nodded slowly, mulling Mr. Montgomery's words over in his head. He had felt similarly about Riley for several years. Of course, his cousin and best friend had standards—he *would* trust Riley with just

about any woman, as long as the woman herself could be trusted. Riley's problem wasn't choosing to seduce but rather a lack of self-restraint in the face of temptation.

"I always think I can help Ash. He's in pain, I think." Funny, because the admission seemed to pain Mr. Montgomery more than anything—he squinted as he said it, and his mouth slightly twisted. English restraint. Or just general upper-class restraint. Peter's aunt was like that, bless her.

"I see." Peter nodded. "Yes. I've often felt that Gibson is a lost soul. There is good in him, though."

"Absolutely. He has an excellent seat on a horse, and he can shoot better than any man

I know.” Mr. Montgomery shrugged. “Everything else about him drives me insane.”

There were times when Peter could almost say the same of Riley, but he didn’t believe Mr. Montgomery was being perfectly serious. Probably trying to lighten the mood. Men in general were unwilling to reveal their more personal thoughts on any given subject, Peter had found, and the man had probably crossed a line he now felt a need to retreat from.

Their conversation shifted to other subjects at that point, and Peter let it. He wasn’t one to insist on making someone uncomfortable—if Mr. Montgomery would be more at ease discussing the weather, which he

appeared to be, Peter would discuss the weather at length and in detail.

After all, it was unlikely he'd find himself meeting a great many people in this press, and again the masks did make him uncomfortable. Harder to read peoples' facial expressions; hard to know if he was doing and saying the right thing.

So instead, he'd talk to Mr. Montgomery as long as possible and then observe the general goings-on from a distance. That would make him happier than any false conversation with a person whose face he couldn't even see ever would.

Chapter Ten

Although the general feel of the ball was excitement, the people her mother introduced her to faded together in Alice's mind, none of them standing out to her. She admired some, was disgusted by others, and had no opinion whatsoever about the remaining. However, none of these feelings lingered long enough for her to care.

She danced in almost every set and tried to talk with Cassie when she wasn't in demand—but Cassie appeared to be the belle of the ball, an earl's daughter with a sizable dowry and a sweet face. Alice could scarcely

speak a word to her before they were interrupted by a young man full of flattering words that made Cassie blush until her freckles disappeared.

Of course, Mr. Aubrey Montgomery—a blond man in a neat suit with a plain black mask, which he lowered to speak to Cassie after he'd introduced himself—stood above them all. He was attentive and serious, and he rarely left her side for an instant. His attitude toward Cassie was quite tender, and he never pressed her for anything. Alice could see why her friend liked him.

On toward midnight, Alice accepted an offer of refreshments made by a young man with a large nose bulging out from under his

mask. She honestly just wanted him to leave her alone, as much of a fop as he was. She stood where he left her at the edge of the ballroom floor and watched him procure two glasses of punch and triumphantly start back toward her.

He was halfway to her when, out of a side door which led to the library, came a tall gentleman wearing a red mask. She could see even from the distance that neither man was looking where he was going, and inevitably a glass of lemonade spilled down the front of Alice's partner's waistcoat and shirt.

Alice's partner pulled out a handkerchief and began dabbing at his front fiercely. Alice walked over to them, barely

hiding her smile. A quick glance at the other man confirmed Alice's suspicions; his lips twitched with suppressed mirth, though he apologized profusely.

"Miss Knight," said Alice's partner, catching sight of her. "I'm terribly sorry, but I must leave you to tidy up."

"Of course, that's perfectly fine." She glanced around, searching for her parents in the crowd. "I'll—"

"Dance with me." The stranger smiled at her, his eyes tracing over her before returning to her face. "When a man barrels over a woman's partner, he should at least offer to take his place."

Alice drew back. *He can't be serious.* "I

don't know you, sir."

"I'm no one special." His accent and bearing spoke of wealth, standing—he was probably the eldest son, probably a bachelor, certainly not very old. "But this is a masquerade ball, and you can't ask me to introduce myself. I'm not asking for anything but a dance." He extended his arm. "Please. It's my fault you're alone, and perhaps you'll spy your mother while we dance."

Hmm. That was fair enough. After all, the Ashfields had purposefully set this up to be mysterious. It wasn't the stranger's fault that Alice wasn't taking advantage of the secret nature of a hidden face. "Then I will dance with you, sir."

She took his arm, and he led her onto the floor. The music began as they turned to face each other, and Alice, still a little speechless, began to dance.

She danced well, and, finding that the man matched her skill, they glided across the floor gracefully, making it easy for them to talk.

After a few pleasantries, conversation lagged. A quick glance around the room for subject matter was all Alice needed before her mind was overflowing with ideas.

“Do you know everyone here?” She certainly didn’t, and she was anxious to. Even with the masks.

“Almost everyone.” He cocked his head.

“Why? Are you interested in learning a secret identity or two?”

“It’s none of my business.” Alice’s face grew warm.

“If people will flaunt their personal affairs so you can clearly see them, despite the masks—which do little to hide their identities from those who truly know them—it becomes your business.” He almost seemed to grin. “Therefore, Miss Knight—that is what Mr. Ellison called you, isn’t it?—they have created in you an accidental confidante. You observe their lives and become a part of them.”

Perhaps. On the other hand, gossip was technically wrong, and it could certainly be life-destroying. “That’s a clever way of seeing

things.” She placed each word carefully, not wanting to overly commit to his way of thinking. “I tend to be overly observant; I can’t help but understand what people are about. My mother told me a few years ago that if I learn some sordid secret about anyone she knows, she’d rather not hear it.”

His lips curled up again, and he laughed. “Oh, but I’d rather hear it!”

Alice laughed but forced herself to be a bit serious. After all, these were peoples’ lives they were talking about. “Of course, it’s not right to spread slander.”

“But they slander themselves,” he protested.

“That’s none of our concern.”

The dance ended, and the man brought her to the edge of the floor.

“Would it be terribly scandalous for me to ask you to dance again?” He glanced about, then lowered his voice. “I promise I’m not a rake. I just want to continue our conversation. You’re the first woman of any quality I’ve met in a long time who has spoken to me about more than the weather and then whatever subject I bring up—and even then, they just listen to my opinions and then repeat them. I can tell you’re a debutante, and yet you’re not acting like one, and I respect that.”

Alice raised her eyebrows under her mask, not sure how to respond. Surely not all women simply stuck to the weather and so on.

“Yes, I will dance with you. But only once more.”

A smile stretched his cheeks. Alice was starting to believe that this man was truly sincere in what he said and did. “Thank you. Not that it matters—they don’t know who we are, you know. In answer to your earlier comment—we’re not involving ourselves. We’re simply learning from everyone else’s mistakes. We’ll learn from their faults, their indiscretions.”

“That’s ... an interesting way of seeing things. But I suppose it’s true that we can learn best from observation. Better to know that the fire burns, theoretically, than touch it and be sure.” Perhaps not the most perfect

analogy, but it would do.

“My way of viewing things helps us keep away a lot of the guilt that would manifest itself otherwise.” His pride in this statement was evident, but it wasn’t exactly correct.

“Guilt points out sin, doesn’t it?” Alice would much rather have a little guilt and grow, than have no guilt and continue to shrink.

“I’m sorry, I can’t talk of sin at a ball,” the stranger said. “Let’s try something else: not-the-right-things. That makes me feel a great deal less like an example in a Bible lesson. Now, guilt points out not-the-right-things. But we don’t want our not-the-right-

things pointed out, do we? Nobody does. Still, isn't it best for us to have our not-the-right-things pointed out? As we are doing by gossiping about people we have no right to gossip about?"

Alice shook her head in amusement. "I give in. Who do you want to talk about?"

"Miss Knight," the man said. "I'd love to talk about her." He took her arm and led her out onto the floor as the music began.

She nodded. "Fortunate for you. I know her quite well."

"All right." He slowed his steps slightly and tilted his head. "Does she enjoy dancing?"

Alice smiled, inclining her head with an obliging smile. "Very much. It's one of her

keenest delights.”

“Does she enjoy dancing with me?”

Yes, a bit. At least, it was interesting. More interesting than anything else that had happened so far tonight. But no. Too much, too soon. “That she hasn’t confided, I’m afraid.”

He frowned, but it didn’t last. “Oh dear. From your observations, then, if you’re not able to discover her actual thoughts?”

Alice pretended to consider his words. “She does. She enjoys your company and your conversation. It’s not quite as dull as that of every other man she’s danced with tonight.”
Mostly because he’s honest.

He almost grinned—a very civilized,

neat grin, she thought, if it could even be called that. “‘Not quite.’ You hint that it is a *little* dull.” His attention was all hers, and she was thrilled. She wasn’t usually the type to care about another’s opinion, but in a place she wasn’t sure of, being one of the lesser ladies at the ball, his notice excited her.

“Perhaps,” Alice said. “I couldn’t say.”

“Is there anything I could do to increase her enjoyment?”

Absolutely there was. “Talk about someone *other* than her. She’s not a very interesting person, and she’s sure everyone else in this room is.”

“I disagree, but we can talk about someone else if you want.” He gave her the

same look most men would give a needy child, but his smile still flashed. “Who are your parents?”

Alice cocked her head to the side and bit her lip. “My parents are as dull as myself,” she said at last.

He dipped his chin. “Then they are very interesting people indeed. Tell me about them.”

“My father is talkative; my mother is not. That’s really all you need to know.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Or at least that’s the popular opinion. Most people immediately make certain assumptions about them.”

“Oh?”

Alice nodded. “For instance, a more outgoing man is the perfect gentleman. A shy male is antisocial and hard to get along with; a grouchy old man. An outgoing female is giggly and bubbly; the society flirt. A shy woman is sweet and gentle but, no doubt, with hidden depths.”

“That sounds correct. Which category do you fall into?”

“Neither of the female ones, though people often presume that I must be sweet and shy as I rarely giggle. However, I can’t stand to be alone, and I love people; also, I could never be called sweet. I just happen to also be very serious. And you?”

“I don’t fall into either of these

categories, same as you.” The man removed his hand from her waist to make an inclusive gesture—and almost hitting another couple dancing nearby. “I’m not quite antisocial, but I’m not a very fine gentleman.” He sighed, showing what a good actor he was by forcing great grief onto his visible face.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really. I have an alarming tendency to gossip. I gamble, too, sometimes. I lost several pounds last night in a card game.”

Alice hesitated, not sure how to respond to this statement. She didn’t approve of gambling. “So you’re a good gambler?”

“No, a bad one. I just know it and don’t gamble more than a few coins. I enjoy a game

of cards, but games of chance are too risky, and I don't have an ounce of luck. Not that I know of, anyway. I've never seriously bet, so I don't know."

Alice nodded. "That's wise of you."

"Not wise—self-preserving."

"Whatever you want to call it." Alice just felt glad he wasn't the kind of young man who would throw away a fortune in a night. She was beginning to take an interest in him, and she didn't want to find a serious fault in him. A part of her hoped the search for a husband could be over almost as soon as it had begun. After all, he had paid her considerable attention, hadn't he? He could've left after the first dance. Technically, he

wasn't obligated to dance with her the first time.

"I want to call it not losing my fortune."

That would do. But she didn't love the way this conversation was going, and she wanted to redirect it. Still, that was more difficult than she'd thought. Honestly, why did conversation have to be so complicated, so riddled with social traps?

"So you won't tell me who you are?" she asked.

He bent close, placing his lips next to her ear. "Don't tell. I'm the host."

Alice jerked back but didn't say a word. If he really wanted the anonymity, she wouldn't tell, but it was still surprising to her.

“You’re Mr. Gibson Ashfield?” she murmured.

“Yes. Don’t look so shocked!”

“You could dance with any woman here, and yet you’re dancing with me.” Alice hadn’t meant to voice that thought aloud, not really, and yet there it was. She’d let it be and see how he responded. It was doubtless he’d talk to her again, after all, given who he was. He could easily marry a titled woman—he was more in Cassie’s sphere than hers.

“Yes, well. Here I am. Aren’t you important enough to earn my attention?”

She allowed a small laugh. “Not really.”

“I imagine in their soul, every person here would say that to someone. We’re all frauds here, Miss Knight.” Gibson Ashfield

twirled her around. “Every one of us. Don’t let them try to tell you otherwise. No one here has a bit of confidence or any real belief in their worth, and they all are compensating with things that matter little.”

Perhaps that was true. It did seem that London’s upper class bred insecurity. The constant pressure to conform and to stand out together led to so many people living in a state of constant stress and worry.

The dance ended, and he again took her to the edge of the floor. “Can you find your parents from here, Miss Knight?”

“I can.”

“Good. Then I’ll leave you. Thank you for talking with me. It’s been most diverting.”

“I enjoyed talking to you, too.” Or, at the very least, she’d found him quite interesting. She doubted she’d see him again, but her hopes weren’t too crushed. She’d find someone else. Still, that little thread of hope had caused her to arrive at a conclusion.

She had to show confidence, no matter who she was speaking to. That was what made an impression; that was what attracted people.

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“It’s late, I know, but humor me.” Gibson gestured to the chair across the fireplace from him. “Did you enjoy the ball?”

Peter had only stopped by the library,

where Gibson tended to linger late at night, to say he was going to his room, now that the last of the guests had disappeared close to dawn. Still, he lowered himself onto the chair.

“Yes, I did. It was interesting seeing everyone dressed up in all that finery but being unable to see their faces.”

“It is interesting. I enjoy it.” Gibson leaned back on his chair. He had a glass of something dark in his hand, doubtless alcoholic, and he swirled it absently. “Did you meet anyone?”

“Not really, no, though I had a few brief conversations.” Mostly on insignificant things, but he had still enjoyed it. “I’ll grow braver and meet more people as time goes on.”

“Of course, if you try to. Meeting people is not a very difficult thing to do, after all.” He took a sip of his drink. “I met a dozen today.”

Of course he had. He was Gibson Ashfield, not simple Peter Strauss, and he’d been off spending time with his guests rather than standing on the edge of the ballroom like a fool.

However, Peter didn’t consider Gibson exactly the type of person he’d want to imitate. He’d seen him with many women that evening.

“Of the ones I met, though, only one truly stood out.” Gibson set his glass on the small table beside him.

Peter wasn't sure if he wanted to ask, so he simply nodded.

"I had previously believed all debutantes were the same, but tonight proved that is not true." Gibson stood and fiddled with his cravat. "Some of them are quite interesting."

Of course. He was probably referring to the one he'd taken out of the room for half an hour only to return alone. Poor woman. Did she know what she was getting herself into? Or was this simply something she'd stumbled into, helpless? Peter wanted to believe she'd stumbled, that she hadn't run into his arms.

Hopefully Gibson was done with her.

"My parents also hoped I would do

better than her, which makes spending time with her all the sweeter. But that's a secondary consideration, and we likely won't meet her except in passing." He walked across the room to a cabinet, withdrew a crystal glass bottle, and poured himself another drink. "So, once again, I fail to disappoint my parents in a way that's permanent."

"Hmm." Peter had learned early on that Gibson's relationship with his parents was hostile, at least with his mother. His relationship with his father, on the other hand, seemed more inconsistent than anything, which was almost worse. It was hard not knowing where one stood with someone, let alone someone as dear as a parent.

“You know my father?”

Peter shrugged. Not well enough to surely say what type of person he was or what his relationship with Gibson was.

“‘He takes out his anger by having his carriage speed through the streets, scattering the commoners in the way.’ That’s a quote from *A Tale of Two Cities*. I remembered it because it reminds me of him.” Gibson belted down the drink in his hand in one gulp. “That’s it for me. I’m going to bed. You?”

“Yes.” He would’ve a while back if it weren’t for the fact that any time talking to Gibson was precious. He was a lost sheep, and Peter didn’t want to miss a moment with him. “Thank you for talking to me. We should keep

doing so.”

“Of course.” There was a slight drawl to his voice that spoke both of his slight drunkenness and his lack of seriousness. “We’ll have to do that soon.”

Peter made sure Gibson arrived safely at his bedroom before going to his own. He pulled out his Bible, sat down, and began to pray.

“Lord, help that man. Help his whole family and all the ladies he spoke with tonight! They need You. I don’t know how You can use me to help them, but if that’s Your will, please do.”

Chapter Eleven

From the moment Alice stirred the next morning, her maid hovered over her with constant concern. There were some perks, she supposed, to being a lady, a woman with her own maid.

Last night, Alice had stayed out late, dancing the night away with various gentlemen, some of whom outranked her, at the lovely masquerade ball.

She tried not to get overly romantic about the situation, but at her most excited, the occasional outburst of fancy escaped, a renegade feeling from her childhood, when

imagination had been something she allowed herself. She smothered these bursts of childish happiness, but the glow that was adulthood remained in her soul, pleasing her immensely.

Mother arrived just as Alice's maid brought up a breakfast tray. "Don't expect this often while you remain in this household, darling." She lowered herself on the edge of the bed. "However, just this once, I thought you might appreciate it. You had a late night, and I thought we could talk, too."

"Of course." Alice wrapped her hands around the teacup and breathed in the steam. "How did I do?"

"You did well. You talked to a great many people. I think, in general, you were

well favored.” Mother cocked her head. “But we can do better.”

“Of course.” Alice wouldn’t want to live in a world where she couldn’t do better. She’d assumed there would be improvements to make in her general mannerisms and habits, given that she wasn’t accustomed to being a debutante or living her life with one goal—finding a proper husband. She’d have to learn.

“I’m not worried, however.” Mother moved on to speak of the various men Alice had been introduced to and what she knew about their families. Alice made a few mental notes, but she honestly didn’t believe any of this information would be helpful to her. She was fairly certain that she hadn’t met the man

for her yet.

With breakfast finished, Alice's maid helped her dress, picking a lovely gown and styling her hair carefully for a day that would hopefully be full of calls. It was Alice's first true day "at home," though she'd had callers before.

Late in the morning, before the official hours for social calls, Cassie arrived at the Knight residence. Alice ushered her up to her room and asked if she couldn't stay for lunch.

"No, no." Cassie shook her head. "I just wanted to stop by and talk for a minute. Actually, I've—" She flushed. "I've got a favor to ask you."

"Oh?"

“Mr. Montgomery asked me if I wouldn’t like to go riding with him in the park. Of course, I mentioned you—”

“Why did you mention me?”

The color of Cassie’s face edged from pink to scarlet. “I can never think of anything to talk about but you. You know how I stumble for words! So I just—”

Alice laughed. It was just like Cassie to not remember any conversation topics except ones that weren’t particularly appropriate, at least in the sense of not being of interest to her conversational partner. “Talk about me?”

“Yes.” Cassie offered a tremulous smile. “Was that wrong? Perhaps it wasn’t very interesting for him, but I didn’t know what

else to say—when he spoke of riding, I thought of you. So he ended up inviting us both—you as chaperone, I suppose. And I ... I lost my head and agreed.”

Alice shook her head, but she couldn't help but grin, too. *Oh, Cassie.* Her dearest friend was too loveable to be frustrating, from her perspective, and this likely wouldn't be the first time she backed herself into a corner by being too accommodating. “Of course I shall come! I want you to have the opportunity to spend time with Mr. Montgomery. Of all the activities you could have gotten me invited to, this would be the one I'd enjoy the most.”

“Really?” Cassie let out a long breath. “I'm so glad. We'd set on this next Monday

morning, and I'd hoped you'd be able to make it."

"I'll be ready then." It would be no inconvenience but rather an excuse to ride, and Cassie was plainly set to fall and fall hard. As long as Mr. Montgomery was an honorable man—which in Alice's brief acquaintance to him, he seemed to be—she would never stand in the way of their relationship. If there was something she could do to help, she would do it.

"Thank you!" Cassie threw herself into an impetuous hug, which Alice returned as best she could manage. "You don't know what this means to me. Especially since I don't know a lot about riding—it'll be comforting

just to have you there. Oh! And he'll bring a friend, so you won't be alone. Not that you'd be alone, but—"

"That I'd be the third." Alice nodded. "I see. I suppose for you I can also handle another self-important dandy. I'm well versed in the weather and who is in town, so I'll find something to discuss with him, doubtless."

Cassie giggled. "They all ask me about Ireland or my father or something like that. I'm *not* glad I'm so well known in our circles, but I am glad that they find things other than London to talk about."

"What they want to know," Alice said, "is if you're over-loyal to your native country—or, of course, what your father can do for

them. But I know for a fact that Mr. Montgomery asks you about things other than that. He seems like a good choice, Cass.”

“He is! At least I think so. I wouldn’t want to rush into things. Mother approves of him, though. She says he’s ...” Cassie paused and bit her lower lip. “You won’t like that.”

Alice’s blood, which she constantly kept on a low simmer, began to wonder if it shouldn’t boil. “I probably won’t. What did she say?”

“That he was more than good enough for me.” Cassie shrugged. “I don’t mind. Really. I know she thinks all her children ought to marry to a title, and she’s disappointed that I’ve never met her

standards, so she makes those types of cuts to push me harder.”

Alice frowned. “I just don’t like it. What right has your mother to criticize her own child? It’s not as if she’s your stepmother. You share so many things.” Nothing drove Alice wilder, personally, than its being insinuated that the circumstances of her birth made her less than anyone else, but at least she understood it. She felt guilt about it to this day.

However, with Cassie, it was frustrating and senseless. Cassie was born and raised in honor. Though she was the youngest of her family, she was no less noble than every one of them. Just because she felt more sympathy

toward the cause of the Irish rebels didn't mean her mother need come at her, claws out, fifty times a day.

Cassie didn't reply at first, but at last, she shrugged. "I'll be glad to marry. It will be lovely to have my own home and to be responsible for myself. I think I'll settle quite well into being a wife; it seems that it'll suit me."

"I'm sure it will." Alice would do anything she could to assure that both Cassie and she arrived at the stated goal as soon as respectability allowed.

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April 12, 1880

London, England

Alice adjusted her gloves one last time as she glided down the steps of the London house to where her horse waited, tended by a sleepy-eyed stable boy. This mare wasn't Athena, but she had the same sleek black coat and doe-like eyes.

“What's her name?”

The boy bobbed his head and met her eyes with a look that indicated he hadn't intended to talk yet today. “Ebony, miss.”

“Rather uncreative.” Yet the mare couldn't help her name. Alice stroked her muzzle for a moment before moving to mount.

At that moment, she caught sight of Cassie riding next to Mr. Montgomery and another gentleman. Both the men had lovely steeds, which Alice wished she were able to ask the pedigrees of. Cassie's was plainly a riding horse, gray and small, perfectly fine but not noteworthy. She'd have to see if Cassie wouldn't want to invest in a more interesting mount, but of course she wouldn't. Cassie didn't really care about horses.

With the stable boy's help, Alice achieved the saddle and turned Ebony to meet them. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Miss Knight!" Mr. Montgomery called even as Cassie echoed Alice's greeting. "I don't think you've been

properly introduced, but I've brought along a dear friend of mine, Mr. Gibson Ashfield. Ash, this is Miss Alice Knight, one of Lady Mary's dearest friends."

Alice couldn't help it; she stared. He was a handsome enough man without his mask, and she couldn't help but admire that a bit. She wondered vaguely if he found her disappointing. She certainly didn't have a pretty face.

"Miss Knight and I have actually already been introduced," Gibson Ashfield said, a small smirk painting his lips. "At my masquerade ball. She was present, and we danced."

Mr. Montgomery glanced between them

and smiled. "Then we're all well acquainted. Surely that will make for a more pleasant ride."

"Yes ..."

Alice let the word trail off even though she knew she ought to stop it, make it final and firm. Still, she wasn't feeling final or firm. She was sure Mr. Ashfield had never intended to see her again, let alone spend time in conversation with her. Yet here they were.

They started riding, and Gibson Ashfield drew his tall bay next to Ebony. "I thought you said you weren't important enough to dance with me, Miss Knight. Your dearest friend is an earl's daughter! I think that more than qualifies you. Lady Mary has

talked about nothing but ‘her dear friend Alice’ since we arrived at her home.”

“I hope she didn’t say anything too embarrassing,” Alice said, fixing her eyes on Cassie’s back. “But I doubt even association with an earl’s daughter can negate my previous statements.”

“Honestly, I should scold you for your forwardness on that point, Miss Knight.” He smirked. “The smart thing to do when you are with people who you consider, for whatever reason, above you is to be quiet. Don’t let on. I’d hope if you were to meet someone—other than me, I mean—you would have the self-restraint to not inform them you are less than they.”

She didn't appreciate the scolding, mild though it was, but she took it without complaint. It was well warranted. "I didn't mean to say it, really. I was simply surprised."

"Understandable. I've garnered somewhat of a reputation, so you couldn't have been too pleased by the reveal."

Honestly, Alice knew a bit about his reputation but not enough to be displeased. Cautious, yes—but not entirely sworn off him. "It wasn't that so much as just the fact that you'd become fabled in that ballroom. We were all beginning to doubt you existed."

He laughed aloud. "Montgomery! Did you hear that?"

"No, Ash, I didn't."

“I don’t exist!”

“Indeed.” Mr. Montgomery shrugged in disinterest, not even bothering to turn, and picked up his conversation with Cassie again.

“He won’t want anything to do with me.” Mr. Ashfield glanced sideways at Alice. “He’s only brought me to keep you entertained so he can have an interesting conversation with Lady Mary without her mother looming. He’s serious about her, you know—I’ve never seen him serious about a woman before. Actually, he refuses to talk about women with me in general.”

“Isn’t that a sign of honor?” Alice asked. In her opinion, a man didn’t really need to discuss women unless it was one he was

actively pursuing. Never mind that women did just that almost every day—she held men to a standard of goodness she could never ask of anyone else.

“Perhaps.” He glanced away from her and seemed to focus on navigating them both through traffic as they made their way into the center of the park. “Funny how we keep getting thrown together.”

Alice raised her eyebrows. “Hardly. Just twice.”

“Still enough to make it more than a coincidence, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think so at all.” It had to be at least three times, in Alice’s opinion, to equal a coincidence.

“Hmm.” They were silent for a bit before he spoke again. “Monty—Mr. Montgomery, I mean—wants to settle, and he’s trying to convince me I ought to, too. I honestly hadn’t intended to take a woman seriously this Season any more than any other, but I admit it’s worth considering. I suppose I have to grow up and establish my own life at some point.”

That was true. Every man had to grow up at some point. She wondered, vaguely, if he was including her in these musings on purpose or if he simply liked making such observations to near strangers. Though, she supposed sharing confidences was the way most people moved from strangers to friends,

or at least in a way. “Of course I haven’t any choice in the matter—a girl must become a woman when she has her Season. It’s an absolute requirement.”

“Absolutely.” Mr. Ashfield’s hands tightened slightly on the reins. “It’s almost a pity that men aren’t shoved into matrimony a great deal sooner. Of course, I’m grateful I wasn’t, for at eighteen, I wouldn’t have had any idea what to do with a wife. Nonetheless, it would be helpful if society were to make these things a bit more regimented for men. We flit about, taking our pleasure where we can, while women are forced to hold tight to certain specifications regardless of their personal desires.”

That was the fairest opinion on the subject she'd ever heard from a man—or a woman, either—and she appreciated it. Though, it wasn't entirely true. Even if it was, Alice didn't particularly mind. "I'm surprised you say that. Don't men have more responsibilities than women?"

"Perhaps in some ways, but at least some of them have the ability to explore their options. Do you feel you have the ability to explore your options?"

Honestly, if Alice had the ability to 'explore her options,' she wouldn't, for she was happy where she was. It was simply a blessing that she loved the life that was set out for her, longed to embrace it. There was a

certain accomplishment in winning at the game of matrimony, and she felt it would be her greatest victory. “I want to make a success where I am,” she said. “I don’t think I would change my position. That said, there are certainly not very many options open to me, should I wish to do otherwise.”

He chuckled. “Ah, so you’re one of those women who longs to find a successful match above all else?”

“Not above all else, but it is important to me to have a successful, strong marriage. I feel that a carefully spent Season will help me arrive there quickest.” After all, if she selected a man without flaw—or at least without very many flaws—she was sure to have a flawless

marriage.

“I see.” He reached up and tapped his chin. “So you don’t just want a good match is what you’re saying; you want a good future. I suppose any number of men in London could do the job admirably. Montgomery, really, though I think he might have bound himself to Lady Mary at this point. But some of his friends—maybe I should see about introducing you.”

Unwilling to seem overeager, Alice simply nodded without making a reply. She wasn’t sure how she should play this opportunity to speak with Gibson Ashfield. Doubtless they wouldn’t talk again, but he was a powerful man in society.

She should probably take every possible opportunity to ingratiate herself to him, and yet, that was one weakness of hers—she wasn't good at flattery and only made friends as it came naturally. Her very nature made her inept at many of the social niceties that women used to win husbands.

“You know I have more information about you than I did previously?” Mr. Ashfield turned on his saddle and smiled, and she could see he was quite pleased with himself. “Lady Mary told me your family has an estate in Kent, and then I made the connections to the Eltons, who everyone talks about in the past tense in a sad manner—oh, the griefs of having only daughters! She also told me you

have the dearest younger siblings, who you didn't mention at all."

"You only asked about my parents, sir."

"Now I'm asking about your siblings. You've a lot of younger brothers, and a sister at least?"

"Two sisters and three brothers."

"Ah." He seemed to give this information careful consideration. "Now, I also know, simply from whispers that float about London, that your house is not one entirely without a taint."

All the breath left Alice's lungs, and Ebony whinnied at the sudden tenseness she'd allowed to seep through the reins and the saddle. Alice leaned forward to pat her mare's

neck as she thought this over. What did he know and what would he do with this knowledge?

“I’m not shocked, you know—I’m only curious. You needn’t look so tragic. I’m the last man in London who can afford to make your family’s story infamous again. The whispers are never loud, and only those with the most old-fashioned natures shall heed them. That does not include me. I think you’re all right, as far as debutantes go. Much more interesting than most.”

Unused to such frankness, she raised her eyes to him. Might as well make an immediate boundary. “Mr. Ashfield, if you intend to trade such information for favors—”

He laughed. “I wouldn’t think of it. I only was making an observation. Your parents were not wed when you were born—oh, I know the marriage was annulled and all that. But they were not. They’ve patched things up since, and I imagine you’ll do as well as any debutante, but that still lingers over you. Yet my father is no saint, and my family holds its own secrets. I would not judge—and neither would I take advantage. Do you see?”

She considered his words. “Simply put, you’re informing me that you know everything about my family but won’t use it against me.”

“Exactly.” He cocked his head. “In fact, as a show of good faith, how would your family react to an invitation from the

illustrious Ashfields? My mother is having a few friends over, and I'm sure Montgomery and his new lady love shall be included. Mrs. Ashfield would doubtless be thrilled if her son invited a young lady and her noble family to join them."

Alice cocked her head. "I'm sure my mother would be similarly thrilled."

"So shall we thrill both our mothers, Miss Knight?"

"I suppose, as long as it's not too much trouble."

"Never too much trouble. I'll arrange it, and you'll receive an invitation shortly."

Chapter Twelve

April 14, 1880

Wearing a light-pink gown, Alice stepped through the door to the Ashfields' home and took in the house once again. Without the decorations of the ballroom and so on, the mood was slightly more solemn, without the magic it had possessed on her last visit. However, it was still a lovely home, one well worth owning. She just thought the life of the ball should be better breathed into its day-to-day workings.

Their only son hurried to greet her

when Alice and her parents stepped into the parlor. “I’m so glad to see you here today, Miss Knight,” he said, smiling broadly. He had a nice smile, welcoming, and in it she saw the boy he’d once been, probably, back when he was the same age as her brothers. It was endearing.

“Thank you for inviting us.” Alice glanced around the room, which was simple but elegant, clearly redecorated recently. She imagined people like the Ashfields could redecorate every Season, if they wanted, to keep in line with whatever modern trends were introduced. “Everything looks lovely here.”

“Thank you. I shall tell my dear mater

you said so. She spends a great deal of time making sure everything is just so. But come—I need to introduce you to my guest.”

“Your guest?” Alice flickered her eyes around the small crowd of people, trying to discern which of them he meant.

“You are all my guests, but he is my houseguest. Mr. Peter Strauss, recently arrived from America. He’s staying with my family for a time.”

“Oh!” So that was where Mr. Strauss had gotten to. She confessed she’d not really paid attention to who he would be staying with while in London, only knowing that it would be friends of his. She was surprised those friends were the Ashfields. “I know the

man. He stayed with our family at our country estate for a few weeks before we travelled to London.”

“My! Yet another coincidence, Miss Knight. I tell you—our connections are greater than you acknowledge.” He smiled at her, and she knew he was reading something into it that she didn’t dare to. Not at this early stage of their relationship.

For now, she’d steer away from any discussions of fate, keeping her thoughts away from three coincidences in a row. “How do you know him?”

He shrugged. “I met him on a trip I made to America a few years ago. He works for a newspaper there, the *Pennsylvania Herald*.

The man writes the most interesting articles, and he's also an author. I like having guests. Besides, I owed him a favor, and he wanted to do a series of articles on our life—you know, upper-class London, et cetera. Doesn't hurt a thing."

"Right." She'd heard that much, save the part about his being owed a favor by Gibson Ashfield. That was new and unique information; she wondered what Mr. Strauss could've done for him. "What do you think of him?"

Mr. Ashfield cocked his head. "Do you really want me to tell you? You know I can't be serious about it. Or at least I can't be kind."

Alice sighed audibly and gave him a

look. “Yes. But do try to be serious—I’d like to know your impressions. I’ve never been sure quite what to think of him, and you seem to know the man better than I do.”

He cleared his throat and faced the small crowd, lowering his voice as he began to speak. “As you wish, milady. He’s constantly wrapped up in a book, he doesn’t know a thing about shooting, and he doesn’t play cards. As if that weren’t enough, he occasionally pulls out a pencil and notebook and scribbles something down—who knows why? Then there’s his coffee. He insists upon it; says it’s the only thing between him and death. Besides, he’s quite the clergyman.”

“Oh?”

“He likes to tell me what’s right and wrong, which is not something I appreciate, and he has a quote for every occasion—not always from the Bible, but it’s all the same.”

He shifted from foot to foot like a small boy, and Alice again saw the vulnerability in him; that vulnerability that, to her, was the most precious thing in the world. Could she really reach that side of him? Was it worth a try?

“Would you like to renew your acquaintance with the esteemed Mr. Strauss now?”

If she wouldn’t be getting anything more out of Gibson Ashfield, she might as well speak to Peter Strauss. He was a pleasant man,

and it appeared his effect on Gibson Ashfield was worth noting. “Indeed, I would.”

He led Alice over to the hearth, where a small group of people stood and sat near the fire, talking. In the center of them stood Mr. Strauss, dressed in dinner finery but, nevertheless, managing to look a bit out of place—not in an uncomfortable way, however, somehow. He seemed so at ease with his awkwardness.

His eyes were flying back and forth between people as he tried his best to give everyone his attention, as if he couldn’t bear to have any one person seem less important than the others. When he caught sight of Alice, though, his face split into a smile.

“Miss Knight!” He moved forward and reached for her, an honest, open gesture. “You look lovely. Come and join us—we’re just talking about ... I’ve forgotten.” His bewildered expression was enough to make Alice laugh, but she restrained herself for the sake of his pride. Men did have such delicate egos.

One of the ladies, eyes sparkling, spoke up. “Your novel, Mr. Strauss.”

“Oh, yes, though I’m sure we can find something much more entertaining to talk about.” He smiled self-consciously and stepped back into his place, drawing Alice to him with that unique magnetism. He wasn’t the sun, wasn’t the earth, wasn’t the tides—the man

drew one more like a pretty view or a bubbling fountain, for the peace rather than the strength of him. She found that gentle pull interesting, something to be explored if never quite given in to.

“I found it quite entertaining!” someone else broke in, and the whole group agreed. Whatever Mr. Strauss had been telling them, it had endeared him greatly to their person. Alice supposed it was because he was just so personable, so unique, and so different from what they were used to.

“What is your book about, Mr. Strauss?” Alice asked, willing to be magnanimous.

“It’s not that interesting.”

The voices rose in protest again, this time informing Alice of a drama involving a complicated relationship between two brothers and families split during the American Civil War.

“Have you finished it?”

“Yes.” He flushed. “But it needs to be polished of course. I’m working on that now, when I can. Of course, my employer keeps me busy, so I mostly do bits of work over the weekends, but I’m quite close.”

The conversation continued around them, and Mr. Strauss engaged with everyone, but Alice remained silent and let the others talk. She wasn’t in the mood to discuss books—really, she never was—but there was

something deep and true about the man that made him nice to listen to, even so.

In time, the conversation and the people passed on, and Mr. Strauss turned to her with that gentle smile that asked permission to access her deepest soul—something she was determined never to allow.

“Are you enjoying London so far, Miss Knight?”

“Yes, I am. Are you?”

“So much!” He grinned. “It’s better than I could’ve imagined. I mean—all of Dickens’s negativity is true, but there’s so much to love as well. The hustle, the bustle, the variety of people. So many of the Ashfields’ acquaintances are quite pleasant. Simply

spending time with them is lovely.”

“I’m glad.” Of course, he seemed the type to be happy wherever he was, but she still hadn’t expected such an effusion of positivity. Alice didn’t like London much; it was a means to an end. “For me, of course, there’s the extra burden of being away from home and family.” She paused and shook her head. “But you have more reason to be homesick than I do. The rest of my family and my home is only a train ride away. For you, it’s quite the journey.”

He nodded. “Yes, it is. But it’s a bit of an adventure for me, too, though of course I can’t wait to get home. I have three siblings, and parents, not to mention my cousins and

friends. But I have God while I'm here—and friends like you.”

“And Mr. Ashfield, I suppose.”

“Right. But I'll do all right here in London, and so shall you, I'm sure. God has us in His hands, even if we're out of our natural environments.”

That was very true. She allowed the silence to wax on for a bit as she considered his words, wanting to take them in. There was so much uncertainty, and she never let herself experience it. But something about Peter Strauss made all those insecurities somehow closer to the surface, and she struggled to contain them in those moments.

So she changed the subject. “Your

childhood in America must have been interesting.”

He chuckled. “You’re not the first person to say that to me tonight, you know, but no, it wasn’t that interesting.”

“But you probably have things to tell me that I wouldn’t know about.” Anything to get him talking about things unrelated to God’s control of her life. It felt like a raw subject.

““There was a star danced, and under that was I born.”” He cocked his head. “Really, no. Nothing interesting. I imagine I have a story or two—and if we talk more, I’ll bring them up—but they all scatter from my brain at the slightest interest from another person, so

I'll have to tell you as I think of them. Besides, there are much more interesting things in this life to discuss than my childhood."

That wasn't helpful at all. The fact that there were more interesting subjects to discuss didn't aid her when she wasn't sure what those subjects were. Thankfully, just then the butler informed them that dinner was served, and everyone began sorting into couples to walk to the dining room.

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The dinner progressed just like every dinner Peter had been a part of since he arrived in London. He was seated between two

ladies he knew only vaguely, and they conversed on this and that.

He believed he was supposed to talk mostly to one side or the other, but he couldn't limit himself that much. He didn't want the lady on his other side—whoever that was—to feel abandoned. Especially if he was thinking of the wrong side ... Now, was it right or left?

Miss Knight was sitting a ways up the table, next to Gibson, and she smiled at everything he said, though she didn't quite laugh. Gibson, on the other hand? Much to Peter's shock, not only was Gibson somewhat smitten with her—the complete, individual attention he was giving her confirmed that for

Peter—but he was acting like a gentleman. He had been since she entered the room.

What strange magic was this? Gibson had always been firm about his desire to remain unattached, and Miss Knight wasn't at all the type of woman one trifled with. Gibson knew that as well as anyone.

So why was he looking at her like that? He must know that she would have nothing to do with him unless his intentions were serious. Even so, Gibson Ashfield wasn't a Christian—or at least not a proclaimed Christian. Miss Knight couldn't rightfully pursue a marital relationship with him for that reason alone.

Peter's mind spiraled between these two points until he had to apologize to the lady on

his right for not having any idea what she'd been talking about for the last two minutes. He also almost spilled his champagne glass on his lap, which was quite the feat for a man who wasn't drinking from his champagne glass.

“Are you quite all right, Mr. Strauss?” the middle-aged woman asked, her brown eyes soft with concern.

“Yes, I'm fine. Distractible is what I am—and a bit unaware of where my limbs are at.” His face grew warm, but he ignored it. “You were saying ...?”

The lady launched back into her favorite subject, from what he could tell, which was her daughter. Apparently, Miss

Harriet Jasper was a lovely lady sitting down the table a ways who would likely, if Peter didn't miss his guess, be ashamed of the amount of discussion her 'coming out ball' was receiving.

But that was what was high on Mrs. Jasper's mind, and Peter always seemed to draw out peoples' favorite subjects, even if it wasn't something he was particularly interested in. But there was something to be learned in every conversation topic known to man, and Peter did his best to concentrate on Mrs. Jasper and ignore Miss Knight and Gibson Ashfield.

It was a lost cause of course. His eyes kept flicking up the table, betraying him,

telling him he had to look, had to see how they were getting on. And shame came in unreasonable amounts as he realized he didn't want her to be talking to Gibson Ashfield; he wished she could be sitting close to Peter instead, and she could talk to him.

Of course, that was ridiculous. It was clear one of her greatest goals was making a good match, and, if nothing else, Gibson Ashfield was a good match. However, a good match for Miss Knight? Ah, there was the rub.

He wasn't a Christian. Not yet. Though Peter dreamed, hoped, and prayed that he would be someday soon, as of now, Gibson Ashfield seemed to find the very idea of Christianity repulsive. Miss Knight needed a

man who was strong of faith to lead her household—it would be silly for her to ask for anything less.

The urge to protect her was strong, as it had been from the beginning. Peter needed to get rid of that urge—it was just attraction. Attraction, and she was British and almost too young for him—from his perspective, if not the world's—and they probably disagreed on fine points of the Gospel or something that would make her entirely unsuitable. Peter felt very strongly about so many theological quandaries that marrying a woman who didn't believe the same as he did seemed a sacrilege akin to taking the Lord's name in vain.

But that wasn't even something worth

thinking about as there was no possibility on earth that she would consider him as an option. Instead, he had to focus on what to do with his own feelings, such as they were.

“I had rather hoped Harriet would attract the young Mr. Ashfield,” Mrs. Jasper murmured in an undertone, leaning close to Peter. “But you can easily see that that’s not the case. I know it’s early, but it’s clear Mr. Ashfield has singled out that young lady. He is such a determined bachelor—last I spoke to him, he seemed committed to avoiding matrimony.”

Gibson was unyielding, but so was Miss Knight, and, to be honest, his friend wasn’t putting up much of a fight, either. Nor was

Miss Knight going out of her way to attract him. Of course, she knew he wasn't a Christian.

Could that be God's plan? That Miss Knight would soften Gibson's heart and turn him toward Jesus? That could be it. Though, even if Gibson did convert, he would have a lot of maturing to do—it was another form of unequally yoked.

But if it was God's plan, Peter wouldn't stand in the way. In fact, it would probably be in his best interest to do what he could to further what was going to happen, whether he wanted it to or not.

Not that Miss Knight was necessarily the type to forestall her plans to listen for

God's guidance, but that God's ways would, in the end, take precedence.

Chapter Thirteen

April 16, 1880

The night of Alice's official debut ball was a calm, warm one, the spring waning into summer apparent in the air even in London. Her mother had been fussing about this event for days, and Alice's nerves were on edge, too.

Not that anything would likely go wrong, but Alice still doubted. The entire process of being a debutante was so new to her, and even with all the training she'd received, it felt unsure. Anything could happen.

Of course, Gibson Ashfield had garnered himself and his parents an invitation, though neither his mother nor his father had been able to attend for various reasons. However, at least the man himself was able to come, and from the moment he entered the house, he lingered near Alice. He danced several times with her and then spent the rest of the evening watching her from a distance.

She knew she couldn't give him another dance without showing deliberate favor, and she wasn't ready for that. However, Gibson Ashfield seemed to think that he was her sole suitor, despite the fact that Alice had gained a number of other options. She couldn't simply limit her focus to one man this early on, could

she?

She wished she had time to discuss the topic with her mother, but she hadn't thought of it before the ball started, and she couldn't very well ask her mother, the hostess, to disappear, let alone leave herself since she was the main event of the ball. Before the ball, she hadn't known that Gibson Ashfield was as serious as he seemed to be.

Mr. Strauss was there, too, and he seemed well pleased to see her. He didn't ask her to dance, though he danced with her mother and Ivy, who came in for a few minutes. He'd lingered near Ivy until she excused herself, and then watched from the distance, unnerving Alice slightly whenever

she caught his eyes across the ballroom.

At last he approached her and asked for a dance. He began to talk almost as soon as he led her to the ballroom floor. "This is quite the event! Your mother really made things look lovely here, and I can tell people are enjoying themselves. So many nice people here!"

"That's good." Of course, Mr. Strauss wouldn't recognize how vital this night was for Alice. Though she had debuted and appeared many times since she was presented, this was still her official debut ball, which meant that she had now been introduced to hundreds of people as a woman. However, she had more important things to discuss. "Do you think ... Mr. Strauss, Gibson Ashfield is

your friend, isn't he?" She'd thought, when he was staying at Pearlbelleville Park, that it was possible he could be useful to her. His advice could be specific, after all, couldn't it?

"Yes." There was a wary light in his eyes that indicated to Alice that he already had an idea of what she wanted and wasn't as willing as she would have hoped.

"I wondered what your impressions of Mr. Ashfield have been. Specifically, if you think he's the type of man who might invest an interest in ..." She wasn't sure how to phrase the question, but she needed to know if he was serious about her. The last few times she had met him, it had seemed his interest was steadily deepening.

“I think he’s interested in you,” Mr. Strauss said with no further prompting. “He’s always said he wouldn’t pursue a woman, not seriously, but I suppose that has changed. You realize that he’s not a Christian, or at least he’s not professing.”

“I know.” Of course a man like Peter Strauss would believe she couldn’t entertain the notion of a relationship with Mr. Ashfield when he wasn’t a Christian. Alice knew she couldn’t marry a non-Christian, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t discuss the idea with the man. Perhaps she could make a difference in Gibson Ashfield’s life; perhaps she could even be the reason he became a Christian.

“I do see glimmers of hope. He’s not all

bad.” Mr. Strauss cleared his throat. “Not to say he’s even mostly bad, as compared to some—and we’re all sinners without Christ. However, it’s easy for me to see that light could reach him. It’s just ...” He seemed to pause, though he kept their dancing even and steady, if a bit slow. “You’ll have to pray long and hard about whether or not you are the person to reach him. God’s will should make the difference in this, as in any other case. You know you can’t marry a non-Christian, though.”

“You’re right, of course.”

The dance ended, and he led her back to her mother, then lingered there, chatting, while Alice was swirled into the next set.

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“I’d say that was a resounding success.”
Mother lowered herself onto the edge of Alice’s bed and met her eyes. “You did well. I’m proud of you.”

Alice glowed under her mother’s praise but dropped her eyes, unwilling to make a display of that glowing. “Thank you. Of course, it’s all due to you.”

“But I’m not the debutante who caught Gibson Ashfield’s eye.” There was a slight chuckle in Mother’s voice. “If I didn’t know you better ... but I do. Still, it is interesting. Have you any idea why he continues to seek

you out? His mother hinted to me—at their dinner party—that she wanted him to settle down, but he had shown no previous inclination.”

“That’s much what Mr. Strauss said. I think it’s more a coincidence. We had a few periods of time when we were allowed to speak frankly with each other. I doubt that happens often.”

“Perhaps ... and perhaps not.” Mother tapped her chin. “Whatever the reason he seeks you, proceed with caution, darling, until you really know him. I know there’s a bit of gossip, but he isn’t badly spoken of in certain circles, and his mother seems to think it’s a lot of nonsense. So perhaps she is right. However,

the main consideration should not be gossip but rather what his actual character is like.”

“Mr. Strauss seems to think he is not currently a Christian but is, perhaps, on the edge of becoming one.” More or less, that was what he had said. “I will not remain silent on the subject.”

Mother laughed. “I imagine you shan’t. I admit I would be hesitant to allow this to continue if he were not to make a serious change, but I think, at the same time—especially since Mr. Strauss thinks so—there’s no harm in letting a casual acquaintance go. Let him chase you a bit. That’ll tell you a lot about his character, too.”

Indeed, it would. Mother spoke from

experience, too. Hadn't Papa neglected to properly pursue her during those horrible years when he'd abandoned her—and Alice and Ivy, too—leaving her alone and helpless for so many years?

“At any rate, it'll be better talked about in the morning. I love you, Alice. Sleep well.” Mother rose and left the room, leaving Alice with a lot to think about.

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April 17, 1880

Alice came down a bit late that morning, had her breakfast, then, after a quick

inquiry, found her sister. Ivy always tended to sulk away by herself after guests had been in the house, and, given that she'd probably risen early and been alone for hours, Alice felt comfortable finding her sister and helping her reemerge into the world.

Ivy was curled up in the library with a scattering of books around her, but she wasn't reading—her eyes were fastened on the empty grate, and her fingers absently plucked at a loose thread on the brocade pattern on the arm of the chair.

“Ivy?” Alice cocked her head.
“Company?”

Ivy started, dropped a book, then hastily bent to retrieve it and gently dusted it

off. “Yes, that’d be nice. How are you?”

“I’m well. I slept too long, and you know how that makes me feel.” Over-tired and restless. She’d go for a walk in the afternoon, as they weren’t intending to be ‘at home,’ and afterwards, perhaps she’d make a call or two herself. “How are you?”

“I’m well enough.” Ivy offered that barest glint of a smile that told Alice that she was recovering and would be all right but still didn’t consider herself *quite* well. “I’m glad to see you, and I hope you’ll feel better soon.”

Alice took a seat across from Ivy and rested her elbow on the chair edge, her chin on her palm. “What are you reading?”

She shrugged. “I hardly know. I’ve just

been thinking for so long ...” She flipped the book over. “*Tenant* again. Anne’s magnum opus. I had to reread it.”

“Right.” Alice cocked her head. “‘Had to’ being a relative term. But I know you love books, so I won’t tease you, even if I don’t quite understand it.”

Ivy smiled softly and set the novel on the small table beside her. “Did you have fun last night? It seemed like Mr. Ashfield was following you about quite closely. Do you like him?”

Alice shrugged. ‘Like’ wasn’t important but ‘want’ was. She was starting to want him enough that she would welcome his advances. With Mother’s encouragement and near

blessing, she was willing to at least consider it.

“If you don’t like him, why don’t you tell him to leave you alone?” Ivy’s chin jerked. “I don’t like him. He’s not a Christian, and even so, there’s something *strange*. I have a feeling about it.” Her fingers went to her throat, then dropped.

Alice refused to make a face, but she was honestly quite tired of Ivy’s wonderings. Her sister was always imagining she heard some special voice from God or angels or some sort that told her things. Ivy’s feelings couldn’t be accurate, though—God didn’t communicate that way. “I see. What type of feeling?”

“That he could hurt you.” Ivy’s blue eyes were troubled, but Alice didn’t trust Ivy’s

intuition, because it was based on emotion. Emotion never guided anyone in the right direction.

“I’m sure he won’t. I won’t let him, actually.” She affected a confident smile. “Look. Peter Strauss knows him—you trust Mr. Strauss, don’t you?” For unknown reasons, Ivy had decided that that particular American was to be trusted above all other people, even those of their own nationality. Alice liked him all right, but did she want to rush into trusting him? No. He already knew enough, had access to enough.

“I do,” Ivy assented.

“Then trust him in this. He has not advised me against pursuing a relationship

with Mr. Ashfield, and, in fact, has offered some slight encouragement.” Not a lot but enough that she felt comfortable proceeding. Even if she wasn’t ready to give her heart and soul to Peter Strauss, she believed him to be truthful.

“All right.” Ivy sighed. “That doesn’t mean I feel any better about it, but I know you wouldn’t do anything foolish.”

“Of course not.” Alice hoped her voice sounded soothing but not condescending, though, honestly—She winced. She was a bit condescending, wasn’t she, to her twin? Ivy was her same age, had much of her same educational background, shared the same blood. But that was different. Of course it was,

and Alice shuddered, shaking away the guilt that occasionally lingered after she dealt with Ivy a bit too harshly.

“Alice.” Ivy’s furrowed brow indicated more trouble was coming Alice’s way. “Alice, I would venture to say I know a bit more about romance than you do, though. Not from living, but from observing and from reading. And ... are you quite sure you want to completely dismiss it? Especially when Nettie has always been such a proponent of marrying for love, for passion.”

There it was. Not a rebuke, exactly, but a disagreement that Ivy had plainly had to work to express. However, Alice wasn’t in the mood for this today. “Nonsense, Ivy. As if your

experience with love in the fictional realm would be something I'd want to embrace in my actual life! Look, darling—I know you mean well, and I do love that you want to be involved in my life. But you're never going to have these experiences. You know that, don't you? Here I am in the thick of it. Don't you think I have a better idea of what real life is like than you ever will?"

As soon as the words were out, Alice regretted them ... bitterly. Yet they were said, and Ivy's crushed expression and quick glance to her hands, wrung on her lap, told Alice they had been heard.

"I suppose I don't have any real experience—and you're right. It's unlikely I

ever will.” Ivy’s voice trembled, soft and willing to let Alice be right. To let Alice say those things and get away with that.

Only, Alice couldn’t let herself be such a horrible person. “Oh, Ivy, I’m sorry.” She rose and dropped to her knees beside Ivy’s chair. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am. I didn’t mean that! Not for a moment. Of course you understand romance better than I would—I don’t care about it, but that doesn’t make it less important to you. I was wrong to speak to you that way.”

Ivy shook her head. “It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not. Even if you can’t accept my apology, I must give it, and I won’t have you tossing it back at me.” She squeezed Ivy’s

hand. “It’s no excuse, but this is stressful for me, and I need to stay focused. Perhaps you *could* understand—doubtless you could—but I don’t particularly want to discuss it.”

“I understand.” Ivy offered a slight smile and took Alice’s hands in her own. “I shall be happy, and quite content, as long as you are.”

“I’ll be happy if I have my way and don’t have to worry about romance.” She gave Ivy’s hands a slight squeeze and rose. “Would you like to go on a walk with me?”

Ivy’s expression brightened. “I would.”

More guilt. Why didn’t she do more things with Ivy? She was her sister, her dear sister. Somewhere between childhood, when

keeping Ivy safe had been her ultimate goal and only job, to their present state, when they got along all right but not very well, their relationship had shifted. She wasn't sure how. Perhaps because Ivy was no longer entirely defenseless, or perhaps because Alice had other things to do.

But gone were the gentle, loving days of their youth, when Alice's love for Ivy had only been eclipsed by that for her mother and Nettie. At that time, Ivy had been bound to Alice, too, and Alice believed Ivy remained as caring, as devoted as she always had been.

Why was Alice always the one who changed for the worse, while Ivy changed for the better? It was almost unfair. Alice did so

want to be loving, but ... it wasn't a part of her nature. She had to fight for it. Which was why a marriage filled with romance wasn't ideal—there was enough to fight for already without forcing herself to love someone.

Yet she shouldn't have to force herself with Ivy. She should be willing and even excited to have Ivy about. After all, Ivy wasn't so different from Cassie, and Alice couldn't get enough of her best friend's company.

The burden of responsibility lingered when it came to Ivy, and that was no longer Alice's biggest concern. Perhaps that was the problem.

Sometime later, as she walked alongside a highly-animated Ivy, who clearly

thought walking with Alice was the most exciting thing she'd done in weeks, she cursed that mind of hers, kicking herself for her carelessness.

Why was she always giving up the things that mattered? Pushing for more and more and endlessly more?

Her own persistence got in the way of so many things. Following Christ could be one of those things, for she believed a true Christian would never hurt her twin sister.

Frustrated with herself and the life she was leading, she promised herself to try better in the future—and to try to have Ivy over to stay often once she was married—and put the subject away for another time.

Chapter Fourteen

April 18, 1880

When the church service concluded, Alice slipped out of her pew to find Cassie. Of course, Mr. Montgomery had gotten to her first—he was quick; she gave him that—but Alice still came alongside her friend and linked arms with her.

“Walk toward home with me?” Alice suggested. Cassie’s house was situated closer to the church than Alice’s, but they both liked to walk back together and chat.

“Yes, of course. You’ll walk with us,

too, won't you, Aub—Mr. Montgomery?"

Oh? So it has come to that? Alice smirked as Mr. Montgomery hastily agreed to see them both home safely. Outside the church, Alice heard her name called and turned to greet Mr. Strauss.

"I'm glad you're here! It's such a big congregation, and I'd almost despaired at meeting anyone, let alone someone I knew." He approached her, then glanced beyond her to greet Mr. Montgomery and Cassie.

"Are you alone, Mr. Strauss?" Alice asked.

He glanced around him. "Not now! But, yes, I was. The Ashfields don't attend church—apparently it gives Mrs. Ashfield a headache,

though I don't know the reasoning of the gentlemen."

"I see." Really a shame, but what did she expect? At least Gibson Ashfield wasn't pretending. There was nothing worse than a fake Christian. Someone pretending to be a Christian when they weren't could do more damage to the Christian faith than any non-believer could. "I'd like to see him here, I admit, but I suppose that won't happen."

"Gibson? Have you asked him?"

The request was simple, but of course Alice hadn't. She shook her head. "As if he'd come just because I asked him."

Mr. Strauss grinned and glanced around. "Don't tell, Miss Knight, but men are

wont to do whatever their sweethearts ask of them, even if they consider it distasteful for a time. Ask him! Even if he refuses, he'll see it as a challenge—is what you want that important to him? How will he respond to that unspoken threat of losing you? Is it important enough for him to make a small sacrifice—and another and another? That's how the game is played.”

Alice might refer to romance as a game, but she was somehow uncomfortable with Mr. Strauss's suggesting it might be one, even though she knew he was partially in jest. But he also meant what he said—he believed in her influence over Gibson Ashfield.

“Perhaps I'll try—next time I see him, I

mean.” It was worth a small effort, although she didn’t actually trust her ability to convince him to do anything. Who knew? If he accepted, it would indeed be a triumph—and, of course, good for him, too. She winced as she realized the irony of only wanting Gibson Ashfield to come to church because it meant she would have a level of influence over him, but she *did* want to help him, too. It was just that, at these early stages in their relationship, any sign that his regard was increasing was well appreciated.

“Good! We’ll watch the giant fall together, won’t we?” Mr. Montgomery said, stepping forward. “I’ve tried for years to convince Ash to come to church like a decent

person, but he wouldn't. He's strong-willed, but, Miss Knight, based on Lady Mary's descriptions of you, if there's anyone who could make him do something he didn't want to do, it would be you."

Cassie cast Alice an apologetic look as she drew alongside Mr. Montgomery. "Mr. Strauss, would you walk back toward the house with us? Or do you have a carriage ...?"

"No, I'm on my feet." Mr. Strauss smiled. "I enjoy a good walk in the morning. I'd be happy to walk with you. Is Miss Knight ...?"

"Yes," Alice said. "Cassie and I usually walk home from church. Ivy won't come with us today—she told me she's tired—so another

person would be welcome.” Perhaps it was time to truly put Mr. Strauss to use when it came to the management of Mr. Gibson Ashfield. At least, she was willing to see how far she could go with her questioning before Mr. Strauss told her to stop.

Mr. Strauss fell in line beside Alice, while Cassie and Mr. Montgomery walked ahead, bent close and whispering.

“Quite the pair, aren’t they?” Mr. Strauss commented, nodding his head forward toward them. “It feels a bit fast to me, but then, I’m cautious. I think they both must know their mind in regards to the other, and they’re quite excited about the future. Or, at least, Mr. Montgomery is enamored.”

“Cassie is, or soon will be.” Alice ducked her head and smiled. “I’m so glad she’s found someone so quickly who suits both herself and her family. They’ll do well together, I think.”

“I think so, too.” Mr. Strauss glanced around. “My, London is pretty, don’t you think?”

Alice laughed. She did *not* think, and she was surprised that Mr. Strauss did. “Really? It’s just a town, and such a big one, too.”

“This part of London is pretty,” he amended. “High-towered churches, lovely buildings, those houses with their ivy-covered gates—and it’s sunny today! Yes, I think it’s

altogether lovely. The privileged class enjoys its privileges in a way that benefits all our eyes—or that's how I see it." He flushed. "I know some people who would consider it aggravating, but I don't. Let them have their cake, is what I say."

For a moment, this didn't quite sink in, then it did, and Alice laughed aloud. "Mr. Strauss, there's more to you than meets the eye."

He blinked, glanced around. "There is? Terrifying. I thought I was just me, and I've always been quite comfortable in that belief." He nodded ahead. "Now, Mr. Montgomery, as we were saying before ... a man of great virtue, an interesting man."

“I find it interesting how you so quickly moved the subject off yourself.”

“There is not much to talk about when it comes to me. Not much of interest at least. But Mr. Montgomery is very near a man in love. Look how he watches her as she speaks? What’s the quote again—‘Love, though said to be afflicted with blindness, is a vigilant watchman.’ Nothing is truer than that. I’ve seen many young couples in love, and always there is that constant staring. Look at them!”

Alice did look, and it made her laugh again. “Do they know we’re talking about them?”

“Yes,” Cassie said, half-turning. “We know.”

“Oh, heavens, what a shame. They know we’re gossiping, Mr. Strauss.”

“We’re not gossiping. We’re complimenting a lovely couple,” Mr. Strauss protested.

Cassie flushed, and Mr. Montgomery looked pleased, and they both turned back to each other and forgot about Alice and Mr. Strauss again.

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April 22, 1880

They went to a dinner party held by mutual friends, and there, Gibson Ashfield was

in rare form. He made it clear to everyone present, almost as soon as he entered the room, that he considered Alice to be his, and as she didn't protest in the slightest, the whispers began, and this time, for the first time perhaps, Alice could take pride in the talk she'd started.

“Do you know what they're saying?” Mr. Ashfield asked, leaning close as they sat together in the parlor.

She leaned away. He wasn't doing anything exactly improper—he'd always kept a decent distance from her—but her personal space was a bit more expanded than others', and she needed him to learn that.

“What are they saying?” she said,

nonetheless curious.

“That no man in London will dare approach you now. Is that what you want?”

It wasn't exactly what she wanted, but if it meant that Gibson Ashfield would feel pressured to remain with her, perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing. “I don't know. I suppose, for now, I don't mind.”

He smiled. “We've always been honest with each other, and I appreciate that that is continuing. My parents—” He glanced about. “I'll tell you later, but honesty has not been an oft-reflected trait in the Ashfield household, suffice to say, and that's not fair to anyone present. Not really. I'd rather have honesty than almost anything—a false sense of

security, for instance, or peace of mind.”

Alice nodded. She felt the same. There was no true peace, no true security, in a lie no matter what people said or thought or wanted. Honesty was high on her list of relationship musts, too.

“Speaking of honesty, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you.” She’d been bolstering her courage ever since she’d learned he would be here today, and now was the time. Now she would make her first request for sacrifice, as Mr. Strauss called it, though she wasn’t sure such a small thing could really count as sacrifice. Though, she supposed it was a sacrifice—she was asking him to inconvenience himself and give her some of

his time.

A small sacrifice, but a sacrifice, and she admitted to some anxiety.

“Oh dear.” And that little smirk he sometimes indulged twitched at the corner of his mouth. “Now I’m frightened.”

“You are?” Whatever had she said that was alarming?

“Yes, I’m imagining all sorts of things. Now you know you’ve caught me—so it begins. The requests, the changes, the requirements, the reforming zeal. That’s what I’ve been told about these things.”

“You’re correct,” she admitted. “I do have a request. But it’s not that bad, I don’t think, though it does come with a bit of

reforming zeal, I admit.”

“Really? I was joking, but I’d still be willing to hear it.” He glanced about. “Nothing too bad, I hope, for your first reform.”

“No, not really.” She, too, felt obligated to look about them. She wasn’t sure she wanted to share this with anyone, even though it was simple. Perhaps, she admitted to herself, she didn’t want anyone to know she’d had to ask. She felt some guilt over being with Gibson Ashfield when he hadn’t immediately met the requirement she’d deemed most important—when he hadn’t shared her faith. “I just wanted to ask you if you wouldn’t be willing to come to church.”

“To church?” He seemed surprised

somehow, as if that had been the last request he'd been expecting. To Alice, however, it was a fairly obvious one. "On Sundays?"

She raised her eyebrows. "That's when church is held, after all."

"I see ..." His voice trailed off, and his eyes grew distant. "I haven't been to church in years—which I'm sure you know. I've nothing against the institution—just nothing for it. The whole thing seems like a lot of pomp and process that I'm simply not that interested in for myself. Still, I've always felt that people ought to go if their consciences convict them." Again he stopped himself, brow furrowed. Strange that this should be a difficult request for him to sort through, as, to Alice, it was

somewhat simple. However, if he needed time to think it over, she wouldn't protest. He could process all he wanted, but in the end, Alice was determined to triumph if it lay at all within her power, which it seemed it might.

"I'm always tired on Sundays." His words were half a pout. "And I feel strange going alone."

"Then, for now, you can go with Mr. Strauss," Alice suggested. "Later, you can meet with me and my family."

"A temptation, I admit." He cocked his head. "Very well, then. I'll come. I don't want to, and perhaps I won't keep coming, but I must at least try, for your sake, I suppose. I could do with a bit more of that type of thing

in my life, and it's the sort of society I really ought to be associating with, regardless of my own preferences."

Alice quite agreed that it was. "You might enjoy it more than you think you will." She sometimes found church to be that way, though she admitted there wasn't often much spiritual relevance to her. Sometimes she found her brain exercised—but seldom her heart. All the same, church was important for so many reasons. Reasons she'd explain to Gibson if he ever deigned to join them, which it seemed, at this moment, that he just might.

They spoke for a few more moments, then Gibson was called away by a friend, and Alice turned to find Mr. Strauss lingering in

the background, not speaking to anyone at the moment. She motioned him to her side, and he came to her.

“I asked Mr. Ashfield to come to church, and he agreed.”

Mr. Strauss’s face immediately split into a grin. “See? I told you you could. I doubt he even protested that much, if he did at all. He wants to please you.”

“Perhaps ...” Or perhaps he wanted to keep her firmly in the place that he wanted her, and that was the step he knew he had to take to keep her there. Would he continue trying to please her once they were married, when he didn’t have to? When she couldn’t leave, couldn’t get away, even if she wanted

to? The future she had dreamed of closed around her throat, causing her to feel choked, trapped. What was this sudden feeling?

She didn't like it. She didn't like it one bit. But there it was, suddenly making her doubt the relationship she had just assured, had just been trapped into by the whispers and the way he presumed that her company was his, that she would not ever wish to belong to another. That presumption was a trap.

A welcome trap, she assured herself, forcing even breaths and telling herself that the ache in her throat, the feeling of choking, was all in her head. She was losing her mind if she thought it was real, for it wasn't.

“Are you all right, Miss Knight?” Mr. Strauss leaned toward her, concern in his honey-brown eyes. “You seem preoccupied.”

“I was only thinking ...” She hesitated, looking up at him. He was a kind man, and he didn’t seem to possess the judgmental attitude so many did—including herself, she admitted. She was all judgment and no mercy, and it did not suit her. It didn’t suit anyone, actually—it wasn’t the right way to conduct oneself. “Mr. Strauss, this is a small step, but I cannot marry Mr. Ashfield if he is not a Christian, can I? I mean, it couldn’t possibly be right, even in certain circumstances, could it?”

His face drooped a bit, but there was a sparkle in his eyes that told her he was glad

she asked. “No, no, I don’t think there’s a way to make that allowable. The verses are clear—do not be ‘unequally yoked.’ The reasoning being that there would always be that pull away from Christ, and no one can pull like a husband or a wife. No one ever could, because the way we feel toward our husband or our wife is unique! So we can have friends, relatives, acquaintances who are non-Christians and retain our faith, but I can’t imagine the stress of having a wife who didn’t share my beliefs. Now, if you find yourself in the situation, we are not asked to seek a divorce—you remember that, don’t you?—but you should never knowingly marry an unbeliever.”

“I thought so.” She drummed her fingers along the arm of her chair. This whole thing was really so frustrating. Why couldn’t he be a Christian? He was practically everything else she wanted.

“But there is hope, isn’t there? He is so willing to come with you to church, as you said, and I believe you soften him, Miss Knight. No, I’m sure you do.” Peter Strauss smiled again, and all his optimism and cheerfulness caused Alice to smile in return. He was so dear, and he clearly thought her influence greater than she did. He liked her, too, which was rare in this world. Alice so often felt that people didn’t really like her, that it was just something they put on because

she was their family or because she had money. They didn't really want her around—they didn't really value her company.

She wasn't exactly the easiest person in the world to get along with, and she knew that. She dreamed of efficiency, not harmony, and she believed that in efficiency she could find more order and, therefore, more congeniality. However, that wasn't how most of the world thought, so she was forever having to explain her motivations to others. When she didn't bother to explain, people didn't understand.

That was where the lack of liking came in, she felt, at the point where people just didn't understand the meaning of the order

she was trying to enforce. Perhaps she'd try to slow down more often and explain herself.

But Peter Strauss had understood her without all the explanations. He seemed to understand just about everything, though of course that couldn't be exactly true. No one understood everything.

Yes, he was a valuable friend. She'd call him that—a friend, not simply a useful acquaintance. Perhaps if she started thinking of people as friends and not friends—instead of useful and not useful—she'd be a better person, like Peter Strauss. She wasn't useful to him, and yet he sought her out—and there was no reason for that, other than a kindness of spirit that Alice could only grasp at. She

didn't know if she would ever be nearly as kind or as pleasant as Peter Strauss. She seriously doubted it.

Still, in an attempt to be a better person, she was willing to try everything once.

"I think there may be hope," she said, meaning the words as much about herself as Gibson Ashfield. "I won't throw him over yet. He can be so pleasant, and he seems to want ..." Her voice trailed off as she considered how to best phrase what she meant. "He seems to want innocence." It seemed he'd lost whatever he'd had of that years ago, and she could understand desiring to know less. She often did, after all. "I think he's drawn to light. For anyone drawn to light and not

darkness, there is hope.” At least that was her firm belief.

Peter Strauss nodded. “Yes, indeed. There’s absolutely hope. I’ve had many wonderful conversations with him over the last several weeks. Sometimes I wonder if he isn’t already a believer, the way he talks, or very close to the decision, but the next moment I’m not sure. Regardless, never fear that I’ll cease to plead your case, for I shan’t, while there is breath within me. But the fact that he was willing to accompany you to church says, to me, that he’s not as far gone as others seem to believe, and, moreover, that he has heeded me at least a bit.” He winced. “I admit I can get preachy, though I try my best

to approach everything I say from a perspective of my experiences, not from some far-off field of a pastor to his sheep. I always want to present my struggles rather than my triumphs—in them, God is greatest, for that's not how I appear, I suppose. At least sometimes."

Alice nodded slowly. She liked that—the fact that her struggles were evidence of her Christianity if she was able to overcome some of them. "The fruits of our labors."

"Yes, or rather, the fruits of God consuming us." He cocked his head. "God is so powerful, and so loving, that we Christians can't help but show Him in our every effort. That is, if we belong to Him."

Another wince, another stab of guilt. Could anyone, from the outside, tell that Alice was a Christian? Yes, if they knew her heart, they might find traces of God there, but otherwise? Was she behaving in a way that showed what she believed? And if she wasn't behaving in such a way, how could her beliefs be true?

Yes, Alice knew all the verses about not worrying about your works, but it wasn't that, exactly. It was her failing to bring forth anything in response to the change she proclaimed had been made in her by God since the earliest days of her childhood. Where was the change? If the change wasn't there, was she really one of God's children?

It appeared not. After all, she could easily tell that Mr. Strauss was a Christian, but it was harder to tell with her, surely.

“I need to get closer to God,” she admitted.

“It’s every day another small battle, another ten steps back for every one forward. Or it feels like that. But, more often than not, you look back and realize, in time, that you’ve come a lot further than you thought, so there was forward progress after all. Even if the path looked a bit different than the one you expected. Believing and living in Christ are two different things, aren’t they?”

They were, and Alice thought too little about that struggle, which meant, of course,

that she wasn't struggling. In truth, a bit of struggle was needed, wasn't it? Otherwise, she would be living in her own passivity and mediocrity.

Of course, there was such a thing as being too worried about growth, obsessing over how well she was progressing and focusing on works, on the outward. There was a delicate balance to be arrived at, and Alice always seemed to overwork herself on things that didn't matter and neglect what did.

Frustrated, she blew a quick huff between her lips. "Believe it or not, you've given me a lot to think about, Mr. Strauss. Thank you. I think I need to spend some time considering the way I've been conducting my

life.”

Instead of becoming judgmental or concerned, his face lit up. “Don’t we all? It’s almost daily for me. I’m glad I’ve made you think—honestly, making people think, and ruffling their feathers a bit, is what an author is meant to do ... and to think I did it with my tongue rather than my pen. Won’t this moment go down in the history of unusual events?”

Peter Strauss didn’t know his own sphere of influence, did he? He had such a charming way about him, as he took no credit for his own wisdom and caution.

They spoke on light things after that until Gibson Ashfield came back to claim her.

Chapter Fifteen

Tuesday, April 27, 1880

Peter genuinely liked Mrs. Knight—who had recently given him permission to call her ‘Claire,’ even though he’d yet to actually do so, a bit anxious about how that might be perceived—and he thought her dinner parties were a perfect example of why.

She did things excellently, and Peter appreciated a woman who did things excellently. Events were no exception. It was plain a lot of thought and time had gone into making everything come off well, and yet it all

felt effortless.

The men were discussing politics now, although they really weren't supposed to with the ladies in the room, and Peter couldn't blame them, he supposed. He knew these days, with Parliament in session and a great many reforms to property laws being considered, there was a lot to go over. Besides, the ladies all seemed well occupied.

Except Miss Knight. Oh dear. Why was she off on her own? She wasn't speaking with anyone, and her expression portrayed a great deal of boredom and tiredness. Would she appreciate his presence? She'd spoken to him more and more often in recent days, when Gibson wasn't near, so perhaps it would be

welcome.

He approached her and took a seat nearby. She immediately turned to him and smiled.

“Mr. Strauss. Tired of talk about the Houses?”

“I admit I don’t understand it all, but it didn’t bore me.” He glanced toward the cluster of men. “I always like hearing how people in different crowds discuss politics. A lot of similar threads remain, but there are those subtle differences in how people discuss things that make it worth listening to.”

“That’s interesting.” Yet her eyes said it wasn’t terribly interesting. She struck him as the type of woman who would be interested in

politics if she were told she was allowed to be, but since that was not the case, she had decided not to worry about it. And, therefore, the subject bored her with the distance of someone who had only somewhat involved herself in it. Or perhaps she simply was tired of hearing about it.

“I don’t even like my own country’s politics,” he admitted. “It causes my family to disintegrate into factions and start brawling—especially as my cousin Riley is quite passionate. No Virginian feels they were properly treated, but he’s not right about all the origins and ...” He shook his head. “I won’t bore you.”

To his surprise, she shook her head. “I’d

like to hear about that, though I agree that now is not the best time.” A slight nod toward her mother. Was it more that she was interested in politics but Claire felt it wasn’t a proper subject? Perhaps. He was never quite sure what Miss Knight was thinking, though he had come to have some ideas.

Still, he let it slide without asking for clarification. He wouldn’t get her in trouble with her mother; after all, there already seemed to be a bit of tension between them, and Peter would do all he could to detract from that, not add to it. “I was so pleased to see Gibson at church on Sunday. I barely spoke to him on the subject of the sermon, but he seemed overall positive about it, and he

mentioned to me that he'd keep going. But you spoke to him about it, didn't you?"

Miss Knight's eyes lit up. "Yes, I did. I was surprised how much he picked up on—and he asked me a few questions, which allowed me to explain a little better what the sermon was about and so on. I recommended further reading, though I don't believe he'll actually do it. Still, I could tell he'd taken everything in, which surprised me. I thought it might be simply for my benefit, but if that's all that keeps him, he's still benefiting greatly from it."

"He's starting to please you, then!" Peter leaned back and regarded her from a bit more of a distance, something his spectacle-

less eyes appreciated. He knew she wasn't madly in love with Gibson Ashfield, unless she was that cautious about sharing her actual emotions, which he didn't exactly doubt but at the same time did—she seemed the type to be quite open about her feelings. However, her affection for the man was growing—he could see that, and he hoped it would continue.

“Of course.” She seemed flustered, offended even, that he would question it. “I like him very much. Not to say I'm madly in love with him, but I don't think I'm the type who will ever be.”

Though he hadn't expected her to say so in so many words, he was not surprised that she felt this way. She just seemed like the type

of woman who felt she was above romance, who felt that the silly words of fancy contained in novels and poetry were a level of intellect below her. He liked that about her—the fact that she was trying so hard to be sensible. But she'd not had her heart stretched yet, and when that happened, all the naïveté about love would disappear as soon as the scales would have fallen from the eyes of a more fanciful young lady with her first actual experience with passion. Peter was sure of that. There was always a degree of surprise in a new experience, regardless of one's expectations.

“I thought I knew everything about love, too,” he pondered softly.

“Hmm?”

“Oh, I was just saying I thought I knew everything about love, too. Before I ... When I was young.”

Instantly, interest entered her eyes, and Peter realized he shouldn't have let on that he'd been in love, because now the side of Miss Knight that contained her feminine sensibilities—which was a bigger side than she admitted—could never leave him alone until she knew the details.

“I didn't know you had a sweetheart,” she said tentatively, every word gentle as she tested them, and then watched his expression.

To a woman who knew nothing of the situation, he wasn't ashamed of his broken

heart. He could wear it on his sleeve, even if it wasn't particularly pretty after the misuse he'd put it through, and not tremble. There was simply no more breaking to be done at this point. "I don't. She loved someone else, but I was in love with her, as much as I could be, and I would still do anything for her." Within reason at least. He wasn't going to do anything immoral of course, and that would be a lot, given how their relationship had changed over the past few years—he wouldn't be alone in a room with her, for instance, and he'd held to that standard from almost the beginning of Riley's courtship of her. "She's married now, and I've ... I didn't stop loving her, but I made myself fall out of love with her, and it's been

some time. But, you see, it just wasn't what I was expecting. It was simultaneously a better and a worse feeling than I'd expected—and I think there was a lot more depth to it than even I had anticipated.”

“Right.” Curiosity continued in those dark eyes of hers and told him that she wasn't going to be letting him go anytime soon. She would have to know all the details. “How long has she been married?”

“Two years. She has a baby girl now—Polly. Sweetest little thing. I'm the godfather.”

“Oh.” She winced. “That's ...”

Painful? Awkward? Sweet? All of the above?

She arrived at, “Interesting.”

That would do. It was an apt description of the whole situation that Peter and Riley and Maddie had gotten themselves into—Maddie willingly and yet unknowingly, Riley by taking initiative, and Peter because he couldn't be honest about his feelings. Or rather, he lacked the courage to begin a relationship. That was it, wasn't it? He'd been scared of his feelings, scared of hurting Maddie, scared she wouldn't want him, scared of ruining their relationship.

That had caused him to react in fear rather than as he should have, which was with love. Love would be bold and truthful. Love would step forward and take responsibility for its existence. Instead, love had threatened his

relationship with his best friend—and his dear, honorary sister. In fact, it had ruined his relationship with Maddie, though she didn't know it.

“Anyway, as they should, the feelings I had for her faded in time, and I've come to feel something more like ... envy. Not jealousy, exactly. I don't want her, but I do want her life.” He shook his head and chuckled. “That probably makes no sense.”

“No, it does. You want the life she's created with someone else, but you don't want to be married to her, exactly. Just to someone.”

“Right, but it wouldn't be wise for me to be married.”

She cocked her head. “Why not? Surely your job is fairly stable. Other than”—she gestured about—“now, when you’re traveling. But, in general, aren’t you able to support a woman, albeit modestly?”

He shook his head. “It’s not about money—it’s about me. I’m not at a place where I would be a good husband, I don’t think.” At least, that was his belief. He’d heard nothing from God on that score, so he’d decided to believe that he was not meant to have a wife, because otherwise, it was just one long exercise in patience. This caused a small squeeze in his heart—wasn’t he meant to be patient? To wait on the Lord’s timing and accept whatever was thrown his way,

regardless of what that was? Yes, he was a bit faithless if he narrowed himself down to what he believed was right—not what God had said was right. “I mean, I don’t think so at least,” he amended. “I feel that, based on the fact that I didn’t do well with the love I was given, I will probably not be gifted again until I’m a bit more mature.” Only immaturity could lead a man to act in such a foolish way, shying from his own emotions and blaming the timing, and sometimes even God, for his lack of initiative. “I think there’s something in me that is a bit too caught up in my own mind to be a serious candidate for a woman, and I wouldn’t want to draw her in to the messes I’m always creating.”

“I suppose that makes sense ...” But her lips pressed together tightly, and Peter knew she was considering something. “You call love a gift? You believe it is from God?”

“Sometimes. I feel that God gave me an opportunity to pursue a good woman, and I rejected it.” He shook his head. “I was foolish.”

“But you said she was in love with someone else. Surely, even if you’d pursued her, she would not have been interested? And, if she had been, would you have wanted her? I mean, when she loved someone else. Since you put so much emphasis on the feeling, it seems like that wouldn’t be something you would be interested in.” Her keen eyes glued

Peter to the chair, and he could see he'd have to account for everything.

"I'm not sure." Forever, he would be unsure, because he had not acted, he had not told Maddie. Forever he would wonder if the strength of her fragile attachment to Riley had been enough in the early days.

Honestly, he could have spoken to her when he was sixteen or six—he'd been as sure then as he'd been when she first took an interest in Riley, when they courted, when they married. But he hadn't.

"You see," he said with difficulty, "I loved her but not enough to speak up. I mean, I feel that I should have spoken up, but I didn't. I never got close until she was already

in love with Riley—he’s her husband now, and that’s what’s important—and then it just seemed like a lost cause. I could never compete with him—for her or anything else.” Riley had a magnetism that even a woman as collected, as down-to-earth as Maddie couldn’t resist, and Peter had submitted to that without a word. “But we were close for years, as friends. There was nothing romantic about our relationship in the slightest, but I never gave her the chance to reject me. I was a fool.”

Miss Knight regarded him for a long moment before she spoke. “Or perhaps it wasn’t time, and you knew it. Is she happy with the man she married?”

“Yes.” Of course. Because if it were any

other way, Peter wouldn't be able to bear it. He knew Riley and Maddie had things to work through, but overall they seemed blissful.

“Do they get on well?”

“As well as anyone.” When Maddie and Riley were happy, it was almost sickening.

“Then it does seem like God has taken care of her and Riley— isn't he your cousin?”

Peter winced. All the more reason he felt guilty—not only was he inferior to Riley in every way as far as personality and strength went, but he had also lost his sweetheart to that enigmatic cousin of his. “Yes.”

“Hmm. Does he ... he doesn't know?”

“He knows.” Peter might as well let Miss Knight know all his secrets, all his guilty

sins. “I told him before they were married, because I wanted him to have the option of keeping her away from me.”

“Really? You told him?” Her eyebrows arched. “You have more honor than I would have anticipated, Mr. Strauss. Not that I didn’t think you had honor, but that most men would spare their pride and risk their friend’s marriage rather than admit that they’d been disappointed.” She leaned toward him. “Men are such prideful creatures. Have you never thought that that showed great strength of character?”

Strength of character? If he had any strength, he would’ve been honest with Maddie from the beginning rather than

keeping it all a shameful secret. “I don’t see any strength in my actions. Failure to act, yes.”

“There is strength in restraint at times, wouldn’t you say?” Her restless hands moved from the arms of the chair she sat in to her lap. “Would you marry her now if she were free and wanted you?”

He shook his head. “I think, now that I’ve seen her with Riley, and now that I know how she handles motherhood, and now that I’ve seen some of the things she’s dealt with and how she did—” They weren’t terribly compatible, honestly. Alike but unlike in all the wrong ways. “But, if I were to go back in time, without the foresight, I wish I would

have had the courage.”

“Perhaps. And perhaps you would have ruined your life. At least consider that alternative before you spend the rest of your life berating yourself for something you did in the first quarter.” She smiled, plainly pleased with her wordage, but what she said rang with truth, even if he wasn’t quite ready to admit, if he ever could, that his silence had been the right choice.

He longed, with too much intensity, for the life Riley had, and though those longings weren’t right—he should just be happy for his friend and not worry about whether or not he’d be alone forever—those longings made him want to change the past. Made him want

to create a world where he could be the one with a wife, a home, and a baby instead of the one who barely had a career, lived with his parents, and flitted from place to place, making new friends everywhere but never creating a friendship that would last until death.

“It’s a difficult balance.” Knowing he couldn’t continue this subject with any amount of reasonability, he was determined to change it. “Romance and listening to God. I suppose more accurately, we are to keep our heart for God. We aren’t to peddle it about; we aren’t to give it to anyone, and we aren’t to give it completely—there is always a part that belongs to God even before our spouse. Yet we

shouldn't be afraid to seek out the marriage He wants for us. If there's one thing I'd like to warn you about, it's the lesson you've already taken to heart somehow, without being experienced. Better shy than burnt, hmm?"

"Yes, I suppose. By 'the lesson you've learned,' you mean ...?"

"Oh, not giving up your heart until you're sure. Romance between Maddie and me is well over, but when it was there, it was so bright and wonderful that I couldn't think about anything else. I didn't exactly neglect my relationship with God, but I feel there were times when I came close, despite my best efforts to do otherwise. I was thinking of Maddie as more of an ... Not an object,

exactly.” He felt his face flush. “Perhaps I saw her as a prize to be won that I was ill-equipped to try for. I let that freeze me in place without considering that God’s will would come to be if I would only step forward in faith. I couldn’t have possibly failed if it was meant to be.”

“Can’t you apply that to your regrets, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“If God would have worked His will through your ‘step of faith,’ can’t He work His will through your disobedience, too? If it was disobedience, for you haven’t convinced me of that.”

He hadn’t convinced her of that? Hadn’t

she heard a word he said? “Of course I was in disobedience. I loved her, I was given the gift of love, and I refused to apply it.”

“That’s not true.” Her brow furrowed. “You knew her since childhood? And were dear friends? Did you ever advise her, help her, keep her company as you have me—or Ivy of course? And when your cousin was courting her, did you speak with him?”

He had. He had done everything he could to make sure Maddie’s life was easy, her relationship with Riley was easy, and her marriage continued to be easy. He was surprised at the stoutness of Miss Knight’s defense given that she had never much seemed to like him, but here she was being kind

nonetheless. “Thank you, Miss Knight. You’ve given me much to think about.”

She shifted on her seat with a slight toss of her weight that indicated her indignation for his vigorous self-hatred. “You’ve made me think often enough, so I hope I have.”

Chapter Sixteen

As Alice and Peter Strauss's conversation began to ebb, and Alice's embarrassment over being so outspoken began to rise, Ivy stepped out of nowhere and took a seat near Mr. Strauss.

He immediately turned to Alice's sister and asked her a question about a musical piece they'd been speaking of, and Alice let herself fade into the background. She didn't mind. Seeing Ivy's face light up as she was noticed and admired by someone not related to her was worth being ignored for a time.

Alice didn't know why she'd felt

obligated to be so encouraging of Mr. Strauss, but she hadn't been able to help herself. She'd felt bad for him, for his broken heart and his missed chance. Alice hated the idea of missing a chance more than anything, but she also hated the idea of rushing into something, and she felt that he'd made the right choice based on evidence of his character and what he'd said about Maddie and Riley. They sounded like they were suited for each other. Perhaps Mr. Strauss was not suited for the woman he had loved, and there was something about the way he spoke of the incident which confirmed her belief that he was basing his guilt on things beyond his control, not things that were legitimately his fault.

Besides, regardless of whether it was his fault or not, or what he should've done, it had happened the way it had happened. It was time for him to move on rather than continue clinging to the past.

Alice hoped he went home, found a nice, church-going, gentle American girl to heal his heart, and started the family he so clearly wanted. She wished him all the best, and she was flattered that he'd said she'd made him think.

Mr. Strauss and Ivy were engaged in a serious conversation beside her. "You should get a cat next chance you get. A kitten, I mean, to raise. 'What greater gift than the love of a cat,' you know."

“I’ve often felt that was true.” Ivy’s eyes were glowing like they always did when someone suggested she ought to get a kitten. Of course, nothing had come of it yet, and she’d yet to get a cat to stay since their original uncreatively-named Kitty.

“Do you like cats, Miss Knight?”

Oh, lovely. He was trying to include her in the conversation, even though she wasn’t a part of it. She should’ve left and spoken with Gibson Ashfield while she had a chance. “I do, as much as I like any pet, I suppose, but I like dogs, too.”

“She likes horses best,” Ivy inserted.

“Oh, right, of course.”

Alice rose. “I’ll leave you to chat about

cats and music, for I have very little to say about either.”

“About music? The subject is inexhaustible, much more so than cats,” Mr. Strauss protested.

“No, I don’t really care for music,” Alice replied.

“She hates to sing, and she hates playing the piano more. I don’t think she minds *listening* to music.” Ivy said the words quickly, like she was helping mend Alice’s broken reputation.

Mr. Strauss just chuckled. “It’s not for everyone.”

“I’ve avoided it over and over again. I’ll keep out of it tonight when they call for

performers, too.” She would for the rest of her Season, if it could be helped.

Peter glanced sideways at Ivy. ““She’s hard to guide any way but her own,” he quoted.

She wanted to laugh, but she refused and found her way to Gibson.

A bit later, there was talk of performing, as she’d predicted, but with Ivy and Cassie both there, she had nothing to fear. Also as predicted, Ivy took charge.

“Mr. Strauss, would you like to perform?” Ivy asked. “They asked me to play, and Cassie said she would sing if you would.”

Mr. Strauss agreed and stepped forward to the piano. Cassie turned to him, beaming,

and placed a page of sheet music in his hands. Alice watched as he fumbled in his pocket for a moment before withdrawing a pair of spectacles and placing them on his nose—after almost dropping them twice of course.

Her cheeks hurt from keeping her laughter contained to a polite smile. Honestly, could this man do anything that wasn't hopelessly awkward?

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Miss Ivy played the last bar of the song and let her hands drop onto her lap. Around them, the few listeners applauded, praising the trio for a good performance. Peter was proud.

He had acquitted himself well enough, though the real talent plainly lay with the two ladies. Lady Mary had a rich, full voice, the kind that was searched for and rarely found in sopranos.

Miss Ivy played the song with unusually brilliant emotion, plainly not following the music as much as her own sense of what the song should be. She hummed along with the music, singing snatches to herself, and Peter sensed that Miss Ivy, too, had a fantastic voice, though different from Lady Mary's. Miss Ivy's was a soprano as well, but airy—like the singing of some fairy. That well described Miss Ivy. Fairy-like.

A few in the audience asked for another song, but both Lady Mary and Peter hastened

to say that they thought it best to relinquish their places for someone else.

Miss Knight stepped forward. “Please, Mr. Strauss, won’t you just perform one more song?” She placed a hand on his arm.

Peter took a minute to respond, staring at her and trying to figure out why he wasn’t answering. Though, of course he *knew* why—because his feelings for her were continuing to grow, and he’d have to continue to rein them in. It simply took discernable effort. “I will.” He forced the words through his tight throat.

“Now, Cassie, you won’t let him sing alone, will you?” Miss Knight asked, turning to her friend. Her hand was removed in doing so, and Peter breathed again.

Lady Mary shook her head. “I suppose not,” she said. She approached the piano and began discussing music with Miss Ivy.

“You gave in easier than I expected.” Her lips twitched as she met his gaze. She could look him in the eye evenly—not surprising as she was a tall woman and his height was below average.

He remained silent, not sure how to respond. He couldn’t very well say, ‘You touched me and my mind went blank.’

She cocked her head to the side, eyes thoughtful. “I hope I didn’t talk you into doing something you didn’t want to do.”

“Not at all,” Peter said. “I’ll be glad to do it if it brings you enjoyment.”

“It mostly brings me an excuse to not play myself,” Miss Knight said in an undertone. “I’d go to ridiculous lengths to avoid that.” She smiled, almost weakly, and returned to her seat. Peter went to the piano and held a whispered consultation with Lady Mary and Miss Ivy before they began another piece.

When they finished, Gibson Ashfield stood before anyone could say a word.

“Thank you to the lovely trio. Now, I’d like to beg Miss Knight to perform a duet with me.”

Miss Knight whitened visibly at Gibson’s words, and Peter couldn’t stand that. He stepped up to Gibson.

“Don’t make her. You see the expression on her face?” he said in a whisper.

Gibson ignored Peter, keeping his eyes on Miss Knight. “Won’t you?”

“I’d rather not.” Miss Knight forced a cheerful smile, but her eyes still held terror.

Peter pretended to be adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves. “Just leave her be.”

Gibson continued to ignore Peter, transfixed on the girl he was both courting and torturing—whether he knew it or not on the latter count. “Please, Miss Knight? It would be a great honor. One song?”

“No. Perhaps some other time,” said Miss Knight. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips pressed together in a tight line. Not

everyone was talented that way, and she should be allowed an escape without embarrassment. But how to go about preventing the embarrassment?

Peter glanced about the room, looking for such an escape. People were starting to be curious over the delay and had even begun to glance at each other, to whisper. That was the way of society. It sought the slightest hint of gossip—and pounced.

“Miss Knight, please.” Gibson stepped over to her side and took her hand.

“I can barely play or sing,” Peter heard Miss Knight reply softly. “Please excuse me, Mr. Ashfield. I’d really rather not.”

“Nonsense. Don’t be modest.” He

tugged her hand gently in the direction of the piano.

“Gibson.” Peter strode over to Mr. Ashfield, sure that that action was the only way now. “Miss Knight isn’t going to play tonight. Leave her alone. She has the right to refuse you, and it’s not right for you to press the matter. She’s a lady; be a gentleman.”

Obviously offended, Gibson scowled, but obliged, and went off to talk to a few gentlemen, who had chosen the comfort of the fire and conversation over the sound of music.

Peter turned away, leaving her time to recover from the apparent terror the idea of having to perform in front of people had caused her. He managed to get other people to

begin, making it as if Miss Knight had never been asked to play. In no time, he glanced back to see her composed, and went to her.

“I’m sorry about Gibson,” Peter said. “When he gets an idea in his head, he’s incorrigible.”

Miss Knight smiled. “It’s all right. Thank you for standing up for me. I think playing in public is the only thing I’m afraid of. I really do have a terrible singing voice, and I’m no pianist.”

“Perhaps I could help you with that—at least with the piano playing; I’m no expert on voices, as I’ve never really struggled with it myself, nor had professional training.”

“No, thank you. I’d prefer to remain

mediocre. It's not important to me, and I don't think I'll ever truly be forced to perform. Although, that was rather hard to avoid. Thank you again."

"It was nothing," Peter said, glancing down.

"It was something. It was wonderful of you," Miss Knight replied before turning to join those gathered around the piano, listening to a young lady sing a duet with another gentleman.

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Alice watched as Gibson Ashfield, still moody and irritated after Mr. Strauss's rebuff,

nearly stomped out of the door. Of course, Mr. Strauss had to leave with the Ashfields, but he lingered in the foyer, bidding good-bye to her.

They talked for a few minutes about random, unimportant things. Mr. Strauss was obviously putting off his departure, likely wanting to say something to her about her refusal to play the piano but not knowing how. So she made it easy for him.

“I want to thank you once again for stepping in for me.” Alice swallowed. “I would have been very embarrassed, my pride injured, if I had to play. My poor mother—she would have been worse off than me. She can’t stand to see me fail at anything. She’s so determined upon perfection.”

Strangely enough, Mr. Strauss seemed surprised to hear her bring it up. She wondered vaguely why he lingered when he obviously felt no need to hash out the subject. “Well. Of course. I’m just sorry if I embarrassed you by being so fervent.”

“You didn’t at all. I think sometimes Mr. Ashfield needs to be told to behave himself. The expression on his face was quite amusing.” She found it easy to smile at this thought. “I know I’ll see you at church, but I thought I’d ask now, before you leave. Will you be at the opening of the Royal Academy of Arts Monday next? That’s considerably more to my taste than music, you know. I paint and sketch—or I do when I have time.”

“That’s lovely.” Mr. Strauss’s face slowly broke into a grin. “I would enjoy that.”

“Then you will come?”

Mr. Strauss looked over Alice’s head, presumably at her father, though Alice didn’t turn, and then returned his eyes to her face and nodded. “Yes. I’m sure Gibson will want to come, too.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll be there. Good night, Miss Knight.” Then his brow wrinkled, and his mouth twisted.

Alice laughed; she’d heard the homophones before, and it didn’t bother her, but his expression was so amusing. “I’ll see you Sunday, then.”

“Yes. Sunday.” He fumbled with his hat again and made his way out the door.

Chapter Seventeen

May 3, 1880

Peter glanced around him, swaying from side to side in an effort to take in as many of the fabulous paintings as he possibly could. The Royal Academy of Arts was indeed quite the spectacle, and though Peter understood little about art, he could tell this was an impressive collection.

Gibson Ashfield was a lot less interested in the art and a lot more interested in Miss Knight. Which was to be expected, but ever since that night when he'd tried to convince

her, unsuccessfully, to play a duet with him, the mood between the two ‘sweethearts’ had shifted.

Miss Knight was considerably more annoyed. She seemed to spend more time avoiding him than she spent talking to him. Meanwhile, Gibson maintained his pouty presence, the only child who had, at last, met his match as he never had been forced to as a boy.

They were both being immature in their own way, though at least Miss Knight was hiding it fairly well. Gibson wasn’t even trying, and his lack of respect for the lady’s wishes and decisions grated at Peter’s nerves.

Furthermore, Peter’s position in the

Ashfield house was tenuous. Mrs. Ashfield actually seemed pleased with Gibson's having been put down a peg or two, and had paid attention to Peter for the first time. He'd had a few conversations with the lady since, and there'd been something about her ... something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Something familiar, though.

Mr. Ashfield was never there, unless they were entertaining, and Gibson was decidedly chilly. He apparently didn't appreciate Peter's interference, but if Gibson was going to treat Miss Knight badly, Peter would interfere. He would interfere every time, and Gibson would just have to get used to it.

Except, Peter couldn't be there forever. And Gibson was looking to find a more permanent position in Miss Knight's life.

Oh, Lord, please. Show them the way. Show her the way. This can't be right. I thought You might be changing him, but ...

At last, Gibson broke away from Miss Knight, as if frustrated with her for her lack of response to his comments, and started speaking to Claire and Philip. Suddenly he was animated, suddenly he knew everything about art. Flaunting his knowledge, showing her that he could captivate others. Acting like a child of six or younger. Probably not saying anything accurate, though Peter didn't know for sure. However, Miss Knight's screwed-up

face told him he was just babbling for the sake of babbling.

She had to get out. She had to get out of this attachment to Gibson Ashfield, and she had to get out fast.

Peter stepped to her side and offered his arm, which she promptly took. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"Oh, never mind. He'll get over it." Her lip trembled a bit, but she jerked her head toward the nearest painting, a large landscape depicting what might be a French or German countryside. "Lovely, isn't it? I like doing big landscapes myself. Oh, not on this scale, but occasionally. Pearlbelles Park is just as pretty as that."

Perhaps a bit of an exaggeration, but since it was a family estate, he'd allow that. She went on to talk about the methods used, animated and knowledgeable. He admired her passion; in Peter's point of view, true passion was always something worth noting, and Miss Knight could never fake anything if she tried.

She was too honest, too focused on reality, and her reality was that painting was a special connection to the world around her. A singular form of expression, though she seemed more interested in the practical than emotional side. She probably didn't express her emotions in any real way, unless by accident. He wished it lay in his power to change that, to inspire ... *something* ... in her.

But it didn't. So it was best if he moved on.

Peter cleared his throat. "Passion is interesting, isn't it? So often the things we love, that we really care about, define us. But you've escaped that, I suppose, by not being too all-consumed with your art."

Her cheeks brightened slightly, and she shook her head. "I'll never be like Ivy—or like you. For you, your words, and for Ivy, her music ... They mean everything. They mean things to you that they don't mean to other people—or perhaps they do. Perhaps they could, and perhaps that's the goal you work toward. Me? I like accuracy. I've not been trained, but any artist here would say that my lack of passion stunts my growth. And I don't

care—I'll leave them their passion, and I can take what remains of their accuracy."

"Not everyone has to be a grand artist."

Peter cocked his head. "It takes all types to make the world go around, doesn't it?"

"All types of men," she murmured.

"But, thankfully, I'm not interested in making the world go around. Just a house. And that, a woman must do. If Ivy ever has her own household, she will forever be torn between what she loves and what she must do. I won't have that struggle."

Peter shrugged. "You're right. I have that struggle when it comes to simple things, like going to bed at a reasonable hour or remembering to go to work." He shuddered at

the thought of the few times when his writing or reading had really gotten him into trouble, late for some important event or scrambling to organize his thoughts after they'd long been lost in dreamland. "Like I said, it takes all types to make the world go around. Dreamers have worth, too, Miss Knight."

She didn't say anything, and Peter knew she'd rather remain silent than insult him. But he didn't believe her completely cold-hearted toward his type, especially as a smile seemed to dance just below the surface, causing a tell-tale twitch at the corner of her mouth.

"Come now, Miss Knight. Other than Miss Ivy, what dreamers have you in your life?" He stepped in front of her, placed a

hand on his hip, and that made her laugh, shook her out of the silence. He relaxed his pose. “Really.”

“The people I hold dearest are all realists, or practically. Though, I do have Nettie, who is continually giving me advice on romances I don’t intend to have.” She smiled, a soft light in her eyes. Nettie must be a very dearly loved person. “She’s almost always right, but I think her experience with love is a bit different than mine. She doesn’t understand my class, after all. What makes it tick.”

Ah, yes, because no one from a different social class could ever understand someone from another social class. It wasn’t

like their struggles were similar despite their economic differences. Peter refrained from rolling his eyes. “Who’s Nettie?” He’d heard the name mentioned many times but never in context.

“My governess and my nursemaid before that. She practically raised me and Ivy before she began a family of her own. Nettie is ...” She paused, searching for the right words. “The greatest Christian woman I have ever known.”

“She sounds wonderful. I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“You should! I’d like that, and I think she’d like you very much. Probably more than she likes me just now. In fact ...” She

hesitated, glancing at her parents. “Hmm. Nettie is coming up near London with the little ones this weekend, and we’re all having a picnic together. What if you were to come along?”

Longing hit him in the chest like a hurricane, but he battened down the hatches. Shallow, fleshly Peter wanted to go on a picnic with the lovely, confusing Miss Knight and her sweet family, but cautious, godly Peter knew very well that there were about seventy-three reasons why that couldn’t happen. “Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Yes, you could! I know you could. What else do you have to do?” She brushed away all his previous commitments—though

there hadn't been any, but still—with a wave of her hand. "She'll bring her children as well as my younger siblings, and we're making a day of it. It'll be so fun! And it would be good for you to see a real English upper-class family behaving themselves naturally, wouldn't it? For those articles, I mean? We're not really ourselves without the babies, so you haven't, exactly."

Nonsense. He'd stayed in their home with the younger children there already. One afternoon wasn't going to change his observations, most likely.

Yet her eyes, the firmness of her tone, the fact that she clearly thought Peter should drop everything and conform to her will ...

Part of him wanted to resist just to be contrary, but there didn't seem to be any harm in it.

Oh, Lord, if this is wrong, forgive me.

“If your parents invite me, I'll come.” Perhaps they'd say ‘no’ and save his poor heart the stretching.

“I'll see to the invitation.”

The conversation moved on, but Peter spent the rest of the day working on shoring up his defenses. He'd have to be strong if she were to remain just a friend to him. Though, of course he'd never tell her what he'd arrived at, regardless of the outcome his own heart experienced.



May 8, 1880

Just the feel of Caleb's head pressed against her chest was enough to cause Alice to breathe a sigh of relief. She loved Caleb in a way that gave her hope for her own future as a mother—she wasn't a particularly emotional woman, but the dear boy, with his mischievous grin and his endless energy, gave her the closest approximation to an emotional reaction that any child ever had.

“Alice, Alice!” His golden-brown curls bounced about his baby-blue eyes, and he shoved them back as he pulled away from her.

He was in need of another haircut, but Anna always let the two youngest boys' hair grow as long as possible. "Alice, Ella says I'm not a real Knight 'cause I pushed her into a mud puddle yesterday, but I am, aren't I?"

"Yes, of course you are. But you should be kind to Ella, Caleb." But even her tone wasn't reproving. Someone else would have to do the parenting of Caleb—her parents, for instance—for she couldn't be stern with him no matter how hard she tried. "No mud puddles, no hair-tugging, et cetera."

He shrugged away from her and ran to Mother to inform her of something else, while Alice spoke softly to Jackie and Rebecca and greeted Nettie. They'd picked out a spot just

south of London, an empty field with a brush of trees in the background and presumably a brook hidden within the small forest, or that's what Papa remembered. Apparently this had been a favorite stopping place for him between London and Pearlbellevue Park years ago. It made a nice picnic spot.

“You seem well,” Nettie commented, embracing Alice briefly. “London must suit you.”

She laughed. “No, but I am enjoying it, London or no London. I brought someone to meet you.”

Nettie raised her eyebrows. “Someone ...? Someone special?”

“Heavens, no, but he wanted to meet

you. I forgot Mr. Strauss never had a chance to go down to the gatehouse, so I offered for him to come now.”

“Oh ...” Nettie’s confusion was evident, and Alice supposed that was fair—after all, why would Alice bring an unrelated man on their family picnic? But Mr. Strauss was different. He was a challenge and also a mystery and, at the same time, just a man she enjoyed having around. He really would get along with Nettie, too.

He appeared out of one of the carriages and approached, hat in hand and looking a bit bashful. “I suppose Miss Knight has explained my presence in a way that makes more sense than what I could offer. Honestly, I just enjoy

spending time with her family.”

Alice turned to him with a slight smile. “Nettie, this is Mr. Peter Strauss. Mr. Strauss, this is Mrs. Jameson, though I don’t know if you prefer ...?” She glanced back at Nettie.

“I prefer Nettie,” she murmured. “As long as it’s all right with you, Mr. Strauss. I haven’t any reason to hold to formality with you.”

“Except propriety, but Mr. Strauss is practically one of us now,” Alice commented. He was always there these days, and Ivy and he had a very close relationship—though she didn’t think there was anything else to it—and even Mother and Papa admired him. He fit right in, and she would be a bit sad, almost

like she'd lost a big brother, when he left.

Ivy slipped up beside Peter. "We like him very much, Nettie, so you must, too."

Nettie smiled. "I'll do my best. Mr. Strauss, we've brought the picnic lunch, but not the servants—except Anna and my husband—to help set it up, so of course you'll have to help."

Alice immediately knew what Nettie was doing—testing his mettle, seeing how worthwhile he was, how cheerful in work. She felt that of all the men she could've introduced to Nettie—for any reason—Mr. Strauss was the one who would impress her most.

Would Gibson Ashfield impress Nettie? Alice hesitated to admit to even herself that,

no, he would not. But that didn't mean in time he might not grow into a person who Nettie would like. Though, she supposed his very personality might not make Nettie enthusiastic about spending time with him. He had a Mr. Parker feel to him—flirtatious, overly honest about his failings, charming in a very polished way ... and Nettie hated Mr. Parker, Papa's cousin, with a passion that she reserved for so very few, though she'd never said so in as many words. Alice had picked it up from half-overheard conversations and occasional glares rather than from Nettie herself. However, that didn't mean that Alice couldn't like Gibson Ashfield—her opinions weren't bound to Nettie's.

Peter Strauss jumped to help Nettie and the others unpack picnic baskets without question, as good a worker as Alice had expected. She imagined things were different for him—that, to him, this wasn't an unusual request, wasn't a test. To him, it was probably absolutely normal for a woman to request his help setting up.

Once everything was organized, the children begged to visit the brook and play for a bit before they ate, which was reluctantly granted by the two mothers, who probably guessed, albeit correctly, that they would end up covered in mud and damp after their adventures.

“Mr. Strauss and I will take them. Oh,

and Ivy,” Alice offered. “I’ll keep them out of the brook, or at least mostly.”

“So comforting,” Mother said with a slight eye roll. “But, yes, take Mr. Strauss. We’ll see if he can’t be a good influence to the boys.”

They led the small troop—three girls and four boys—down to the brook, where, predictably, Caleb and Ella dashed for the water. Alice managed to maneuver them to a place where they could all cross with relative dryness, though Caleb and Ella pouted about not being allowed to jump right in.

“If Ned and Malcolm will keep you in order, I might consider letting you swim ... after lunch. But only if you’re very good now.”

Alice didn't have that level of authority of course, but she spoke with an air of firmness, which she hoped would make the children believe that she did, even if it wasn't true. Ivy had a weakness there—she could never lie for the greater good. Alice was not similarly handicapped.

“Mr. Peter?” Rebecca, the youngest of the girls and still hardly more than a baby, lingered by Mr. Strauss's side and tugged at his sleeve. “Up?”

Mr. Peter? When had that started? She supposed her siblings had spent time with Mr. Strauss at Pearlbelleville Park, but she didn't realize he'd developed a special nickname to share with the children.

Mr. Strauss picked Rebecca up and held her in the crook of his arm. “Are we going across the brook, Miss Rebecca?”

“Yeth.”

He obliged, making his way across the narrow area traced with large, flat rocks that made a perfect bridge. Once the entire company had made the trip, they explored their way up a small hill. Caleb and Ella ran ahead, while Ivy trailed behind with Debby and Jackie, and Ned and Malcolm were deep in conversation, leading to Alice’s not feeling pressure to slip into any group—she lingered near Mr. Strauss, who spoke to Rebecca exactly as one would to an adult.

Rebecca was clearly smitten, and Alice

could see why Ivy liked this man so much. Alice liked him, yes, but she hadn't seen how sweet his gentleness was until this moment. He had a way with the little ones that Alice could only dream of possessing.

His conversation with Rebecca apparently concluded, he turned to Alice. "I wish I could live out in the country like this and just picnic all day, but I know that's not realistic. 'It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it.'"

"Are you quoting something?" she asked.

"*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë." He

laughed. "I suppose I ought to use my own words, but I find myself thinking of others' thoughts as much as my own. I've read the book often enough."

Just like Ivy. "Have you discussed it with my sister yet?"

"A bit. She was reading *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* most recently, though, and I admit we haven't quite spent as much time on Charlotte as on Anne and Emily as of yet."

A bit confused but understanding the gist of what he was saying, she nodded. "I admit I don't read much. I suppose that's something you'd find a bit offensive, as an author."

He cocked his head, and his brow

furrowed. “Why would I? It would be a boring world if we all enjoyed the same thing and there was no variance. I enjoy discussing books, but I have no ill feelings toward those who don’t read. It’s not the only interest in the world.”

She was glad Mr. Strauss was so reasonable. She wouldn’t have been able to respect him much if he were the type to enforce his own tastes on others. Of course, Ivy wasn’t like that, either—but she did seem frustrated with Alice, more often than not, for not reading. On the other hand, Ivy wasn’t quite as mature as Peter Strauss. He doubtless had a lot more insight on the situation than Ivy ever would, which had made him a more

pleasant conversationalist. At least in Alice's opinion.

There was some shouting ahead of them, and they increased their pace to catch up with the four oldest. Caleb had Ella pinned to the ground, and Ned and Malcolm were pulling them apart.

"I *am* stronger than you!" Caleb shouted, face red. He gave Ned a kick to further display his strength of temper—if nothing else—and Alice restrained a laugh as Ned promptly dropped him, Caleb landing with a thud on his bottom.

"No, you're not!" Ella shouted back, not nearly as upset as Caleb was but still holding her own, as always.

“Caleb, Ella!” Alice hastened over to them and snatched Caleb up before he made another lunge for Ella. She gave his shoulders a slight shake, then took a seat on a patch of grass and pulled his writhing body onto her lap. “There now. That’s no way to treat your friend.”

“She’s not my friend anymore,” Caleb pouted. “I don’t like her. She’s a nasty girl.”

“Shush, now. That’s rude.”

“It’s *true*.”

“I don’t care if it’s true, which it is not—it’s rude.”

Malcolm allowed Ella to go, and she stood a safe distance away and folded her arms across her chest. “I don’t like you, either.

Anyway, if I wanted, I could do whatever I wanted to you. I'm an inch taller than you this year, and perhaps I'll stay that way, and—"

Caleb jumped up again, but Alice managed to catch his shirttail before another round of fighting began. "Now, Caleb—"

"Miss Knight, if I might." Mr. Strauss set Rebecca down and held a hand out to Caleb. "Come here, Caleb."

The anger on Caleb's face evaporated, and a flush of shame took its place. He scuffed his toe against the ground. "I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did. Come here and let me have a word with you."

Caleb sulked his way over to Mr. Strauss, who knelt and put his hands on

Caleb's shoulders. "Is that any way to talk to a lady?"

"She's not a lady. She's just Ella," Caleb mumbled.

"Now, that's not true. She's a woman, so for your purposes—that of a man in this world, I mean—she is a lady. You don't get to decide whether or not a woman is a lady—she does. I think, at your age, you don't get to make an observation, either, so for all intents and purposes, Ella is a lady of the finest quality. But you're not acting like a gentleman—see, that's the part you get to control."

"I'm not a gentleman," Caleb said firmly. "And Ella isn't a lady."

"You're not, the way you're behaving,

but she is. You have to believe all women are ladies, because it makes your job as a gentleman—even if she’s not acting like a lady—a lot easier.”

Caleb wiggled, but Mr. Strauss gave him the slightest squeeze, barely a reprimand, and he stilled and met his captor’s eyes evenly, if a bit rebelliously.

“You and Ella are great friends. I’m sure if you were to be a gentleman, she wouldn’t say things to provoke you. Perhaps if you were nice to her, she’d feel more like being nice to you. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, I would!” Ella piped up in the background.

“Miss Ella, I’d like to conduct this talk

without your help.” So Mr. Strauss could be firm? How interesting. “Now, Caleb, do you understand what I’m saying? You’re not acting like a Knight; Ella is right. But of course you are one—you must be one. Would you call your sister a nasty girl? Would you call your mother a nasty girl? I’d hope not.”

“No.”

“And I’d also imagine that if someone disrespected your sisters or mother in that way, you’d launch yourself at them much as you launched yourself at Ella just now.”

“Maybe.” Caleb’s eyes lit up, sparkling with ideas. He reminded Alice of her mother in that moment. “I’d run them through with my sword, I think.”

Mr. Strauss laughed. “That may be a bit extreme, but my point is, Ella deserves the same defense. Perhaps you should focus a bit less on how to triumph over her and a bit more on how to be the best person in her life, the person she turns to in everything. You could have quite the friend if you were to promote her to lady and yourself to gentleman.”

“Then we’d never have any fun!” Ella said, stepping alongside Mr. Strauss.

“What? No! Then you’d have the most fun, because you’ll be able to be friends, and a friendship is a very fun thing. Don’t you agree with me, Ned?”

As Ned offered his perspective on the

subject, Alice silently applauded Mr. Strauss. He'd not only found a way to calm both Ella and Caleb down, but he'd gotten the entire group involved in a discussion and used Big Brother Ned as an assurance that they would all behave themselves from now on.

By the time everyone was calmed down enough to proceed, Ivy and the two youngest—save Rebecca—had caught up, and Mr. Strauss suggested they all start back. Though they were reluctant at first, they agreed under the promise of delicious food, and the whole journey began again but in reverse.

Now Alice held Rebecca while Mr. Strauss took Jackie on his shoulders and Ivy helped Debby, for the youngest three were

already exhausted. Nettie and Anna would doubtless be well pleased to see them come back so tired.

Alice allowed herself to fall in step beside Mr. Strauss again as the troop began their way back to the picnic site.

“They’re good children,” she murmured. “A bit energetic, at times, and Caleb and Ella fight like a cat and a dog, but they’re good-hearted.”

“I agree.” He shifted Jackie on his shoulders and glanced up carefully. “Jackie, you would never call Ella a nasty girl, either, would you?”

“No!” Jackie exclaimed. “I’d never do that. I like Ella. I wouldn’t call anyone nasty.”

This was why Ivy loved Jackie—he was all softness and sweet utterances. A veritable Tiny Tim but without the crutches. No, Jackie wasn't an object of pity, except that he was overly shy, but he was definitely the kind of child that deserved such a moniker.

“I can walk now,” Jackie said firmly, seeing his brothers dashing off ahead.

Rebecca responded by jerking her head up from Alice's shoulder and demanding to be put down. Already recovered, they went racing off, and Deborah soon joined them.

“I'd better make sure they don't fall,” Ivy said, casting an apologetic glance Peter's way before hurrying off down the trail after the younger children. However, Alice felt

they'd be fine and, therefore, was comfortable continuing along at Mr. Strauss's side.

"I've been thinking," she said, "about some things you and Ivy were speaking of—how nature will grow children into different ways, but nurture also plays a big part. I think we are all affected by ... by the way we are raised. I certainly am." She wouldn't admit that to many people, but she somehow felt comfortable admitting it to Mr. Strauss, cheerful a man as he was ... and gentle, too, and caring. And understanding and empathetic in a way her heart wanted to be and yet never could quite achieve.

"Yes, I think so. I imagine I'd be a very different man if I weren't the oldest—though

perhaps not very different—and the way my parents—particularly my mother—raised me has shaped the man who I am today in so many ways. I can't imagine myself otherwise, but it could've been different. Worse or better, however you want to term it. And yet, the person I am today is the person God is creating in me as much as the person bent by various circumstances, so I can't say I'm eager to complain.”

“Quite so.” Though, of course Alice could see so many things about herself that she wished were different. She wondered if they were because of who she was ... or because somehow, in her childhood, something had happened to create the

reactions she currently experienced. The fears, the worries, the frustrations, the eagerness to embrace life, to embrace things that might hurt her.

The feeling that she must remain with Gibson Ashfield, even if it wasn't turning out to be as perfect as she'd like. Even if he wasn't the man she wanted him to be ... even if it was starting to look like he'd never change to become that man, that mythical perfect man who she'd created in her dreams over a year ago—and that now seemed to be slipping away from her with every minute.

“You feel that the details of your past have made you into a different person than you would have been otherwise?” Mr. Strauss

suggested. His voice was soft, and again she felt that lovely sensation of being understood. Yes, she hadn't said anything, but he was still the dearest man in the world—in that minute, she felt so keenly in a way she hadn't about anyone else. She knew he liked her all right, but mostly, she basked in his kindness and gentleness, even in the face of those edges of her that weren't quite smoothed, quite perfect. She supposed, as he had said about Ella, he viewed her as a lady, and, to Alice, that made all the difference in the world—to be thought of as a lady of fine quality was half of what gave a woman confidence to believe she was.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I believe I do. I believe that because of the way my parents

weren't married most of my youth, simply put, I think that's where a great deal of my anxieties come from. I think because of the way they handled things, because of the way I ... I was alone so much ... I can't quite explain it. I don't tell people that I have fears a great deal, you know, so I don't want it getting around." She blushed, both because she'd admitted to him how afraid she was of ... She hadn't said what, but it was so many things ... and also because she didn't think a real woman would be most disturbed by the fact that she'd admitted to having emotions. A real woman would be happy to have emotions, because a real woman would see emotions as a blessing and not as a curse.

“I see.” He cocked his head. “So what do you think it is that makes you fear? And what exactly is it that you fear? I suppose I should’ve started with that second question as it’s more pertinent—what is it that scares you? Unless you would rather not say—I would readily understand that, too. You have no obligation to tell me anything, Miss Knight, and I hope you know that, no matter how much I pry. I pry because I care, not because I want to gossip, but at the same time, neither are you obligated to respond.” He gave her a soft smile, and she nodded.

“Yes, I understand. I would not tell you anything I did not want you to know. But I don’t mind, not in this case. I have a good

feeling about you, Mr. Strauss, and I know I'm not the type who has good feelings that are then rewarded. That sounds more like Ivy—Ivy is always saying she has a good feeling about someone only to be proven right, that she really should have had that feeling. But I think I'm no better judge of character than the next. Still, Ivy trusts you, and I find that, inexplicably, even though perhaps I shouldn't, I trust you, too."

"Thank you. There is no greater reward than a woman's trust, in my opinion." His earnest expression told her he meant it.

"Yes, well. You see, I am afraid of ... of not having a family, I suppose. Of not having a future." She wasn't sure if that even summed it

up concisely, but it was a little closer to what she meant than most of the things she'd said recently, so she hoped he would understand. "I don't believe I'm exactly fearful of losing them, but I am afraid of not being able to create a life for my children. Of not having children—children mean a great deal to me, Mr. Strauss. I'll never be able to explain to you why that is true, except that it is."

"It's noble to want children. I think it's one of the most rewarding things in life—as a mother or as a father."

"I quite agree. Which is why I am determined to have them. Quite a few of them. But, more than that, I would like to be married, to have my own household, to be

able to create a good life. And I must admit, even if it's not the most noble impulse, that I long to make that happen, even if it means risking other things. For instance, risking love. I don't need love, you know. You can see what it did to my parents—they were desperately in love, but that did not keep them together. They needed a great deal more than that to make their relationship functional.”

“Yes, everyone does. Loyalty, strength of character ...”

“Yes, marriage is no laughing matter.” She didn't like hearing people, people like Gibson Ashfield, acting like it was all some big joke, for it was not. Rather, it was a vital part of society, of personal relationships, of the

very creation of life.

“I quite agree that it’s not.” Mr. Strauss cocked his head. “But, thankfully, there aren’t too many people that take it lightly.”

Alice disagreed. She’d known plenty of young ladies who did just that ... didn’t take marriage seriously in the least, even if she knew very well that they ought to. However, she wouldn’t tell Mr. Strauss that. Instead, she cast a smile sideways at him. “I know I didn’t share much, but thank you for listening to what I could tell you. As far I as I can, ‘I have unclasp’d to thee the book even of my secret soul.’ From *Twelfth Night*, I think.”

“That’s right!” He chuckled. “See? You’ll become like me and Ivy yet. Though, I

wouldn't recommend it, really."

"I'm sure I'll never get quite there."

They made their way back over the brook and up toward where the adults waited to picnic.

Chapter Eighteen

Miss Knight pulled her brother Caleb onto her lap and spoke softly to him, her dark eyes dancing, flickering almost. She had the most jet-black eyes he'd ever seen on a woman of her complexion, and when she laughed, she was altogether lovely.

Alice. Yes, the name suited her. Instead of sensible, instead of strong, he loved to mull it over in his mind, because it was beautiful. Because it sounded like all the poetry he had ever heard.

Peter couldn't help it. He really couldn't—he'd fought with all he'd had, and it had still

happened. He was attracted to her, but this was going beyond that into territory that could destroy him.

He had to pull back. He'd been right thinking today was a risk—somehow, in her behavior toward her siblings and her beautiful eyes and the way her laughter pulled him toward her like a moth to light, he'd lost, and it was time to make absolutely sure he didn't ever let her know.

Miss Knight had already decided that she would be with Gibson Ashfield. Even if she had the sense to pull out of that relationship, which he was starting to believe might be the best course of action, she had made it abundantly clear what type of man she was

looking for. Peter would not humiliate either of them by pressing her with his unwanted affections.

Besides, God couldn't want this for him. This love wasn't a gift—it was more of a trial or a test. Perhaps. His head was spinning, and he couldn't think. It was time to run scared. He rose from his seat near Miss Knight and casually, he hoped, approached her mother, who sat near Nettie, speaking softly. He hoped he wasn't interrupting anything important, but he had an excuse to talk to them.

“I haven't really gotten a chance to have a conversation with you, ma'am.” He smiled at Nettie, hoping a cheerful expression would keep away the awkwardness of not

wanting to call her Nettie in front of Claire—even though he had permission to call both of them by their first names. It just felt strange.

“Nettie,” she reminded him. “And, yes, that is why Alice said you came, wasn’t it?” She gestured to the ground near her. “Where are you from, Mr. Strauss?”

“I’m from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And Peter.” He lowered himself down. “I feel strange enough calling you by your first name. You’re a married woman, and a mother, a bringer of life, and, according to Miss Knight, a Christian. I’m only a lowly bachelor with no recommendations of my own.”

She laughed. She sounded a great deal like Miss Knight in that moment, and he

barely kept from wincing at the unwilling comparison. “I don’t think that’s true. Claire has been telling me all about you ... Peter. She likes you very much, you know. And she doesn’t like many people.”

Claire flushed. “Not exactly true, but I am selective, and I find you admirable, Mr. Strauss.”

“Peter,” he reminded.

Her eyes flickered to her husband, who was a bit away with his eldest son. Unlike Nettie, there wasn’t quite the confidence in a lack of formality, despite her having asked him to call her Claire when they were speaking alone. How did Mr. Knight tie into that? He wouldn’t be jealous; Peter could

guess that from the few conversations he'd had with the man. Nor was he a paragon of propriety.

Perhaps he was simply the reason Claire felt a need to maintain a semblance of order. Yet she liked Peter enough, it appeared, that that hardly mattered to her. Interesting. How he liked this woman! Honestly, how he liked everyone in this family.

“At least you come highly recommended,” Nettie said. “I think Alice likes you, too.”

Yes, like every woman on earth seemed to like him—a friend and a confidant, a brother or perhaps even a father figure. In the bitterness of the moment, he disliked the

position greatly. He wanted to be seen as an object of affection, not as a loving uncle with sage advice. He was twenty-six, for goodness' sake. He didn't have any sage advice, not really! All he did was repeat what he'd heard.

Yet that repetition touched some people, particularly women. If only he were a charmer instead of a confidant, but he wasn't quite sure what flirting was, and whenever he approached something vaguely similar, it felt disrespectful.

Peter could always be open and honest and tell a woman that he was interested in pursuing a relationship with her. After all, that was traditionally how such things were done. But he never had gotten close enough to do

that with a woman, except in situations where it was clear such advances would be unwanted. As with Miss Knight—and, in part, as with Maddie.

“Er, Peter?”

The way the woman repeated his name told him that he’d missed a question. He blinked at her bashfully. “Excuse me? I’m sorry; I’m afraid I got distracted by my own thoughts.”

“Oh, I only was asking if you had siblings. You seemed comfortable with the children.” Nettie nodded toward her little ones. “I know the little Knights were chattering about you right after you left, and it seems the attachment remained.”

“Little ones are wonderful. I have five siblings—or three, I suppose, depending on how you count it.” He always referred to the little sisters or brothers his parents had lost to miscarriage as part of the family. It seemed wrong to do otherwise, like they’d somehow feel left out up in Heaven. There was also the matter of not letting them be forgotten.

There was a softening in Nettie’s eyes.
“Adoption or loss?”

“Loss. They’re both in Heaven now. We lost them long before they were due to arrive—between me and my brother Andrew. He’s twenty now! Hard to believe. And then we’ve Caroline and Dahlia, who are eighteen and twelve. They’re lovely girls.”

“Sounds like a nice family. You know, I’ve the three—” She gestured toward her children. “But I’ve two others, too. Most recently ...” Then she stopped herself and swallowed. “It was recent.”

Within the last year, if Peter wasn’t mistaken. But, as much as Nettie seemed open about her grief—though it was, of course, quite raw—Claire wasn’t. Yet there was an indefinable something in her eyes that told Peter she, too, carried the scars of losing a child.

He’d seen it often enough. A kind of sadness that couldn’t be easily reasoned with—the sadness of losing a life you’d created, or that your body had created with God’s help,

more accurately. Mothers all over the world held the same glint of sadness in their eyes, that same horribly sad glint. Yet they, or the greater portion of them, lived on, carrying that with them forever.

He believed that it was possible to move on from almost any grief *but* losing a child. He hadn't experienced it, and he rather doubted his ability to bear it nobly—and yet he was not at a loss as to examples of how to do so.

After all, didn't half the women he met make him their special confidant? Peter had heard too many stories of lost children. Yet every one was just as fresh and the pain in their eyes just as real.

And, yes, Mrs. Claire Knight felt that sadness as much as every woman he'd met. But he didn't think it was due to a miscarriage, for there was a slight difference about her eyes that said her pain was different than Nettie's, and he didn't think it was very recent—it was more like an old wound, one she had never properly grieved. Perhaps that was why no one had made any mention of another little Knight sibling, probably having died at birth or in early childhood.

“Claire?” Peter kept his voice low and said nothing else, yet that was enough to get her to raise the most impossibly blue eyes to his. No tears—just the dead look of someone who knew exactly how to handle old emotions

long tucked away.

When she simply nodded, he continued. “The most comforting thing in the world, I’ve found, is knowledge of Heaven. I believe we can all be assured that, no matter the situation, infants lost will be waiting for us there.”

She nodded. “I believe that.”

“If you believe they are in Heaven, then why not speak of them now? Is it just too raw? Or would your husband rather not talk about it?”

She blinked and jerked her head back. For whatever reason, she was surprised he knew—which further confirmed his thought that it was a rather undisclosed fact. “I—” She

glanced at Nettie, eyes slightly bewildered now. “No. Not exactly. It’s not raw, for it’s not new. But no one knows. Except my husband and Nettie—Mr. Jameson, too, doesn’t he?”

Nettie nodded. Her fingers trailed along the blanket and touched Claire’s hand lightly before abandoning the contact for the more dignified pursuit of adjusting the sleeves of her shirtwaist.

“How did you know?” Claire asked. She kept her voice low, so Peter imitated her.

“Your eyes. They gave you away when I mentioned losing my siblings.” Peter winced. “I didn’t mean to cause you pain. I was only curious, and I wanted to know if I might be some help.”

“Ah.” She cast her eyes upward for a minute, collecting herself. “I did lose a child. At birth, though—or shortly before, I suppose. But Alice doesn’t know. We just ... we don’t talk about it. I hope you understand.”

He understood that people in general were either too adjusted to death to find it worth talking about or too afraid of their grief to discuss it. Or, he supposed, sure that they ought to move on, to forget, because the present was now ...

So why grieve?

Nevertheless, it wasn’t his business, so he wouldn’t pry. “I’m sorry for your loss. But I understand; I won’t mention it.”

Her face flushed with relief. “Thank

you. It's just a rather private matter, and I wouldn't add unnecessary stress to Alice's life."

Peter waited a moment, but when she offered no additional information, he let the matter pass. Some things simply couldn't be discussed, at least not in certain stages of one's life, and he would like to respect that, even if it was a bit difficult for him to understand why you wouldn't just push through the pain to arrive at the end of it. Or not exactly the end of it ... but a place of healing.

But Peter wouldn't presume he understood. Maybe the place of healing was too hard to reach, or maybe it was just still a place of intense pain or ... He sighed, unable

to puzzle it out, and turned back to Nettie to ask about her children—the living ones, that was. The ones who didn't carry heartbreak, supposedly, attached to their very existence.

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Mr. Strauss was such a confusing man.

One minute he sat near, almost too near given that they were hardly acquaintances, and told her about his favorite type of biscuit—he called them ‘cookies,’ though he corrected himself with a self-conscious smile, looking like a small boy in that moment, with his cheeks flushing.

Then he stood and walked away,

making some half-hearted excuse, and went to speak with Mother and Nettie. They became enraptured with him immediately, and their conversation continued for some time, even yielding what appeared to be a slight emotional reaction in Mother.

That was the problem with Mr. Strauss, wasn't it? He was a gentle, unassuming man, and yet somehow Alice's feelings were ever close to the surface around him. He brought out something in her that she didn't like, a tenderness perhaps—or a willingness to abandon common sense.

But it was like a biscuit, wasn't it? Likely to make one sick, yet one took another bite, because, in that moment, it was all one

wanted.

And here Alice was, having these thoughts, and she was practically engaged! Or she hoped so. She wanted to be ‘practically engaged’ to Gibson Ashfield—didn’t she?

Whether she did or she didn’t, it had nothing to do with Peter Strauss. But she did wonder about the change in him.

Next time she approached him, as they were packing the baskets, he barely looked at her. He responded politely, but she sensed a difference in him—not a coldness, but a distance.

The distance didn’t make sense. She’d not said or done anything different, had she? She shook out one of the blankets with more

fervor than was needed and made Ned help her fold it and tried to think over their conversations.

Biscuits. They'd just been talking about biscuits. What could be more innocent and companionable than discussing favorite foods? At any rate, they had not disagreed on anything they both had experience with. She'd not had his favorite, which he referred to as 'cinnamon cookies' and praised as a marvel of culinary engineering, but she'd been amicable to the idea of them.

No, that couldn't be why he was mad at her.

And her tone hadn't changed in the slightest toward him, had it? Nor his toward

her, until he'd left suddenly, as if something *had* happened ... but it hadn't.

Further confused and feeling somehow betrayed, she walked over to Nettie, who was giving orders for proper loading of the carriage returning to Pearlbelleville Park with the remains of their lunch.

She glanced back at Alice and smiled. "Had a nice day, Gracie?"

"Mm? Oh, yes." She felt a thousand miles away, but up until she started overthinking, another flaw of hers that was being taken to its limit, she had been having a pleasant enough day. She'd loved seeing the little ones again. "Yes, I did."

"You were right about Mr. Strauss—I

like him very much.” Nettie paused to touch her hair, which was, predictably, starting to spring out of its bun in half-hearted curls. “He is one of the most excellent men I have met in a long time. Especially for his age and background. He has a great deal of wisdom, but he’s retained his youth through it—not that he is old, but most young people who have the knowledge he does find ways to become immature in their intelligence. Not him! Never have I seen such humility in a man under forty. You’d do well to cultivate that friendship.”

A rush of betrayal combined with irritation caused Alice to turn her face away. “He’s all right,” she said, making a big show of

being disinterested in the conversation. “A bit overly moralizing, I think. I wouldn’t agree that he’s without pride.”

Nettie didn’t reply for a long minute. “Hmm.”

Alice faced Nettie again. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing! Nothing at all ...” Yet Nettie didn’t finish the phrase in feeling, even though grammatically she had. “I suppose you know him better than I do. But perhaps that as much lends to your jealousy over him choosing someone else to speak with as anything. I thought you said it was platonic.”

“It is platonic. I don’t care in the least who he speaks with.”

“Of course. But you felt obligated to insult him, which must mean he hurt you. Otherwise, you’d have just accepted it and let me think him lovely, unless it was something that could, in any way, harm me—which it is not.”

The truth of this statement was there, but Alice also felt that Nettie misunderstood. Alice did care about Mr. Strauss in some ways, in that she wanted to impress him, wanted him to think well of her, and was loath to lose his friendship. But that wasn’t love, and it certainly wasn’t anything approaching a desire for a marriage union.

“Or perhaps,” Nettie continued, “you need to convince yourself of Mr. Strauss’s

infamy as much as me. Perhaps it's something you're going to fight. And, Miss Grace, when you begin a fight, I have no doubt as to you finishing it. So, though I don't think it's a battle I'd attempt if I were you, I'll leave you to it. Any protestations on my part will no doubt ingrain you further into your current psychology."

Alice declined answering. It wasn't worth it; it really wasn't. She wouldn't convince Nettie any more than Nettie could convince her—they'd both become aware of each other's stubbornness in recent days, and in some matters, they'd decided to avoid constant quarrels. If Nettie was Alice's mother, truly, they'd butt heads constantly, but as it

was, Alice felt comfortable having no fight to pick with her dearest Nettie.

Yet she would reassert one thing: “Nettie, you know I mean to marry well. Do you really think—?”

And this was when Nettie took the same stand. “Now, Gracie, don’t you try to start something neither of us will ever be content to finish. You should be making friends like Peter Strauss—strong friends who are stronger Christians, who are able to give you the kind of self-sacrificial but platonic love that you’ll find yourself wanting at times. Not that you could exactly be that close to him, an unattached man, but ... he’s an acquaintance worth cultivating, at the least. But, no, I won’t

try to matchmake. I'd be no good at it anyway."

Alice sighed. "Thank you, Nettie. I'll think on that. Perhaps we may continue to correspond. I am certain that if I don't, Ivy will, though she seems to view him exactly as you said ... as an entirely platonic confidant."

"She's wise there. I admire the depth and breadth of that man." High praise indeed. "Marrying Peter Strauss would be marrying well for either of you girls, but I do think that with Ivy, he is just a confidant. An increasingly dear one, yes, but you can tell at a glance how innocent they both are toward each other—neither have any spark of attraction whatsoever. They're like siblings."

Alice assented this, then decided it was time for a change of subject. “While we’re speaking of marriage, rather, I told you about Gibson Ashfield but never got a chance to hear what you think.”

“Ah.” Nettie’s face darkened just a tad. “I’ll be honest and say ... I don’t know enough. I am wary, for he doesn’t seem ... I’m concerned about his lack of faith.”

“Oh, but he’ll change! I know—”

“You don’t know, Alice. You don’t.” Nettie shook her head. “Please don’t marry him, or even become engaged to him, until you are absolutely sure he has converted to Christianity. It’s not that he’s a lesser man for it, necessarily—we are all sinners. But to

marry a non-Christian is to marry without hope, without a future, without a similar goal ... It's called 'unequally yoked' because both of you will be pulling the opposite way and because you will be the only one tugging toward Christ."

Alice sighed, knowing she shouldn't have asked if she didn't want honesty but blindsided by it nonetheless. "All right, Nettie. I'll keep that at the forefront of my thoughts and proceed with caution."

Chapter Nineteen

May 26, 1880

Epsom Downs, Surrey

Peter knew for a fact that Gibson Ashfield had only dragged him to this cacophony of humanity to impress Miss Knight. This wasn't at all his style. Though various writers had referred to Derby Day as 'the day of the sport of kings,' Peter found it more interesting to mix with rabble than royalty.

There were so many people of every class, every station, and as far as Peter could

tell, every possible occupation mulling about. There were jugglers and fortune-tellers mixed with hawkers selling peanuts, boys selling betting odds and newspapers, and a generous dose of pickpockets and other thieves. Peter adjusted his jacket and patted his inside pocket at the thought, though he carried nothing with him.

Despite the milling crowd of humanity, Peter could still see the elegance in the neatly-clipped lawns, the green racetrack against the white fencings, and the grandstand—or whatever they were called in England if it was different—rose above the crowd like a small castle. It certainly contained enough princesses for it, or he presumed so.

“Strauss!” Gibson’s frustrated voice met him over the crowd, and Peter turned. “What are you doing? We’re all going to the Knights’ box after we see their horse.”

Ah. So no more time spent experiencing humanity in England beyond the carefully groomed upper class. He’d have to creep back out later, but for now, he’d resign himself to the spot he’d been dragged to.

Dragged was perhaps a bit of a strong word. But he certainly hadn’t gone because he wanted to see Miss Knight, and he certainly hadn’t gone because he enjoyed horse races, so what was left?

He followed Gibson through the crowd to where it parted, and the horses were there,

preparing for the race. Mr. Knight stood next to a small man, who must be the jockey based on his vivid yellow silks, and another man about Mr. Knight's height, perhaps the trainer, who Miss Knight was avoiding looking at even as she stroked the horse's head and seemed to listen to what her father was saying.

“That's their horse.” Gibson gave the majestic chestnut beast half a nod. “Can't believe they got him in. It's quite a competition to have a spot at the Derby! But he's a good runner, I suppose. I don't know much about horses—oh, don't tell Miss Knight.”

Peter nodded. He was trying to avoid having conversations with her in the first

place, so that would be easy enough to accomplish. Though, in the past month, he'd still been unable to avoid her sometimes, he'd largely left the wooing of the lady to the man who was actually interested in her. Opportunist that he was, Gibson Ashfield hadn't wasted a moment, and now Peter had heard gossip that they were considered practically engaged by most observers.

At last, Miss Knight broke away from the horse—still managing to avoid looking at the trainer—and approached Peter and Gibson with a broad, if slightly forced, smile. “I’m so glad you both made it! I feel confident Star will have a good run today, even if he doesn’t win. There’s some fierce competition this

year.”

“Mm. Shall we head to your box?” Gibson’s eyes scanned the group converging on the stadium, his eyes slightly narrowed. “Your mother and aunt are there, aren’t they? I’d like to see you there before the crowd gets too thick.”

“Yes, that would be fine.” Miss Knight looked longingly over the crowd in the distance, plainly wanting to be amongst the fun of it—the bustle, the cries of the tipsters, the reek of beer and bodies, the policemen shouting to be heard over the rabble. It was getting to be more and more of a press as the time for the race neared, now less than an hour out, and they’d already have to fight to

get in their proper place.

Yet she wanted to see what was happening. Well, for once, Peter agreed with Gibson Ashfield. The press was too much to risk, and the closer they got to the time, the worse it would get. Gibson had mentioned that upwards of 2,000 uniformed policemen were, at times, organized to control the traffic over the course of the day—that was a red flag for Peter.

“How many horses are running this year?” Gibson asked as he took Miss Knight’s arm possessively and led her toward the stands.

“Oh, I don’t remember. Thirty-odd,” she said, focusing her attention on her suitor with

a studied air. “Papa says more than last year. Fierce competition. Two and a half minutes is all it is, Mr. Ashfield, or less, but isn’t it exciting? Really, it’s the defining event of the season.” Her natural enthusiasm did catch up with her then. She loved this, and it was clear in the sparkle of those dark eyes.

“I suppose some would call it that.” But Gibson would make no further agreement to Miss Knight, and she, plainly with reluctance, let the subject drop.

They arrived safely at the Knights’ reserved seating and settled in. Miss Knight updated her mother on the horse—apparently there was much to be said—then settled back with what appeared to be a program tucked in

her hand.

“Who do you think will win?” Peter murmured, knowing Gibson wouldn’t think to ask her.

“Bend Or, I suppose, though I should say Star for loyalty’s sake. But his jockey has a list of titles a mile long, and I overheard as we walked over that Bend Or is a two-to-one favorite now.” She flushed, the ‘I shouldn’t know that’ showing up in her eyes as per usual. “Besides, he’s by Doncaster, out of Rouge Rose ... I think. Doncaster won the Derby in ’73, and the Ascot Gold Cup two years later.” She tapped a pamphlet on her hand. “By the way, there are nineteen on the field. I estimated far greater than there are!”

Gibson was staring at Miss Knight in frank amusement. "I don't know how you manage to remember all that."

Peter did. She cared; it was interesting to her. Why couldn't Gibson just accept that? Yet it appeared that half of the reason he liked Miss Knight at all was because she was different. Gibson delighted in Miss Knight's little differences. What would happen when he got used to them, however?

But he ignored that thought and concentrated on the people around him. When Mr. Knight came over, Gibson turned to him and was suddenly interested in race horses—after all, he had to impress the man, but not the daughter, with his inquisitiveness.

Though Peter had intended to do nothing of the sort, he felt a need to turn to Miss Knight and speak with her. She seemed distant, barely replying to his questions.

At last, she broke the silence she'd created. "I haven't seen you much recently."

"No, well." How could he explain? "I had to leave you and Gibson some time alone, didn't I? After all, you're supposed to be learning more about him, not about me. I wouldn't want to be a distraction." There. That made sense, didn't it?

"Yes, I suppose." She frowned. "Sometimes I feel like, even so, I'm not making a great deal of progress with him. But I think we understand each other, somewhat."

There was something so hesitant about these words, but Peter tried not to think about that. If he started thinking of her as available, he would start dreaming, and though he would never let those dreams become reality, well ...

But scarier than that was the possibility that he *would* allow those dreams to become reality. As he looked out at his life, he realized that the idea of asking a woman to become involved with him romantically was no longer so horrible. Somehow it had faded from the realm of obscure possibilities to explore many years from now to something real and present.

But she was being courted by Gibson Ashfield, and she seemed to have no intention

of putting aside said courtship anytime soon.

Yet he sped to give a remark on her relationship with Gibson, not wanting to allow said hopes too much free rein. “‘Women are the least to be trusted of all animals, monks and abbots excepted.’ It’s a quote from *Ivanhoe*, one of the few novels I’ve actually been able to convince your Mr. Ashfield to discuss with me. His father made him write the sentence down when he was fourteen, and he’s taken it to heart.” Gibson had been gradually opening up to Peter about certain details of his childhood that were absolutely heartbreaking. His relationship with his father and the lessons he’d learned from him were definitely on that list. “You can see why he’s

had some difficulties with you, but he's still here, and he still likes you. That's a lot to be said."

She attempted a slight smile but seemed otherwise disinterested in continuing the conversation.

Then the race began, and, for almost three minutes, everyone was enraptured. Miss Knight was right on the winner, though she was surprised about Robert the Devil taking second place. She'd apparently expected that of the third place winner, Mask, but he'd been behind 'six lengths,' which, to Peter, just looked like 'quite some distance.'

She rambled about endurance and how the last stretch often took out many a

promising colt, and Peter was enraptured and trying desperately not to show it.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

July 2, 1880

It was another ball just like any other, but this time, Alice's nerves were skittering to and fro. Over the last month, she'd consistently felt more uncomfortable in Mr. Gibson Ashfield's presence, and, for whatever reason, perhaps partly due to riotous emotions, she was struggling more than ever tonight.

All she had to do was be charming and

collected. That was all. It was no big task in the scheme of so many others like it. Yet tonight it felt so difficult. Tonight it felt as if every time they danced, every time they spoke, warning bells were clanging away in her ears.

He twirled her around and said increasingly sweeter things. It wasn't his fault that his compliments weren't to her taste, and she could have borne a bit more if she liked him, but as it was ...

Now, it wasn't exactly true that she disliked Gibson Ashfield. He was attractive, certainly, and he knew how to maintain a conversation. Intelligent, suave, rarely in a poor mood, at least around her.

There were a great many things to like about him, in fact. Nonetheless, she couldn't shake the unknown feelings that coursed through her veins.

She completed a dance with him, and he offered to bring her punch, making some joke she laughed at but didn't hear. She nodded and sent him off and waited for him to return.

That was when Mr. Strauss approached her. He smiled, and she extended a hand to him, gesturing him to stand near her and watch the dancers of the next set.

“Where's Gibson?”

“He went to bring me punch.” Her eyes flitted from face to face, avoiding Mr. Strauss

and his ever-prying eyes. He always seemed to know what she was thinking—and yet, lately he'd been holding her at arm's length, too, which meant she wasn't allowed the same privilege.

“If he's not coming back, you could dance with me, if you'd like.” Even that offer was a bit distant. “Not that I'm a particularly good dancer, but it's something to do.” He flushed; she wondered if he knew that wasn't exactly the way one normally asked a woman to dance.

“I've danced with you a time or two before, haven't I? You don't need to be so humble. You're adequate.” Which perhaps didn't sound as complimentary as she meant.

“Er, I meant to say—”

“Adequate is accurate. Would you like to dance with an adequate dancer?”

The tension coiled in her gut disappeared, and she laughed. “Yes. Of course.”

He took her arm and led her out onto the dance floor. She barely knew what she was doing; her mind was spinning, trying to grasp on to one thought.

She liked Gibson Ashfield, and she was halfway through her Season. He seemed like her best and perhaps only option. After he’d expressed such marked interest in her, it would be difficult, if even possible, to move on to another suitor in this Season, which meant

delaying her marriage even further.

Alice couldn't afford that. If she had doubts, she'd have to press past them. It was too late now; she should've thought this through months ago.

Besides, it wasn't like there was anyone else in her life. The only other man to express serious interest in her was Kirk Manning, and she didn't love him, even if Nettie thought he loved her.

Though, that was confusing, too. He'd refused to so much as make eye contact at the Derby, though she'd tried several times. Eventually, she'd given up, allowing the silence between them to be filled by her father's predictions.

She glanced up at Mr. Strauss. He looked confused, and his eyes were studying her with far too much intensity.

Something in her experienced a sensation similar to a tap, or perhaps a tug, and she flinched. She should ask for Mr. Strauss's opinion. For a moment, Alice ignored the thought, but she soon gave in and bolstered her courage.

“Mr. Strauss, what do you think of my situation?”

He blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I want your advice.”

“Oh. Well. On what? I mean ...” He glanced around, his eyes flickering nervously. “I can guess you mean the decision regarding

Gibson Ashfield. But I know that's practically settled."

Alice nodded. As far as everything she'd told Mr. Strauss was concerned at least, it was quite settled. "Yes. But I still have an ability to back out if I need to. What do you think? About Mr. Ashfield and me?"

"I don't know. If it's what you want, I ... I know that you'll make the right decision. You're a smart woman; you know my default answer. If you pray about it, God will guide you."

That wasn't helpful. Too vague, not personal. But he was entirely capable of being personal—far too personal, in fact—and she intended to make him be. "No, but what do

you think, personally? Please don't be afraid to be honest with me."

"I don't know, Miss Knight." She saw his jaw clench. Interesting. He'd always been honest with her before. Why not now?

Alice's brow wrinkled. "I'm not sure, really, but I think I need to continue with it. After all, there's no reason why I shouldn't marry Gibson Ashfield. Is there? Especially since he's made marked steps toward faith in God." He'd attended church every week and become more and more open to her talk about faith. She felt confident he would become a Christian.

Mr. Strauss nodded. "No. There's no reason other than that. Though, it is the most

important one. It's certainly not optional; don't commit yourself until you're sure of his faith."

Alice missed a step; it took her a moment to regain the rhythm. Kirk's name pressed on her heart. *Tell him.* "There's something else."

"Oh? What's that?"

"A friend of mine." As soon as the words were out, she cursed herself. She shouldn't mention this, and yet she felt like she should. "A friend from my childhood, more accurately. We were close when we were young, and when I'm at home, we'd see each other almost every day. But he misread our relationship."

Mr. Strauss's eyes widened. "Ah."

"What 'ah'?"

"He's a man."

"Yes." Alice's brow wrinkled. "Why would I bring him up if he was a woman?"

"I don't know." Something about her statement had flustered him, but Alice couldn't let that distract her. She pushed forward, needing to communicate this last bit.

"He says he's in love with me, Mr. Strauss. Which is ridiculous of course—we're so different, and, honestly, he's spent half the time he's known me insulting me. But a part of me feels an obligation to him, I suppose. We've been friends for as long as I can remember. When I was eight, I went to my

father's estate for the first time, and I was lonely and bored, and I met Kirk."

"Kirk?"

She took that to mean he wanted to know who Kirk was. "Kirk Manning. He's my father's stable manager now, but he's worked for us since he was a boy. Yes, I know; this could turn badly very fast, if you've ever read a romance novel." She attempted a smile. Hopefully he believed she could find humor in the situation. "We got along so well. Then he went off to school--as did I—and I didn't see him until just a few months ago. We still got along perfectly of course, but I thought he knew the dynamic would be ... different now. Then he started talking about love, and I

couldn't consider it with him."

Mr. Strauss nodded. "I understand. But let's not talk about it here." He glanced to the right and the left before leading her off the dance floor to a semi-private corner, where they could talk. "I'm so sorry. That must be difficult. I've never experienced anything like that, but I've heard stories of how hard it is, from my parents, from others. It's not a common occurrence, perhaps, but it happens."

She raised her eyebrows. Difficult? Not a common occurrence? What was he talking about?

"Look." He blew a breath between his lips. "If you learn anything from me, let it be to not hesitate. If you're in love with the man,

don't let fear keep you from him. Sometimes love can be ... can be an indication of God's will. And what's the line? 'Love sought is good, but giv'n unsought is better.'"

"What do you—?"

"Pray about it, absolutely." He took her hand. "But, Miss Knight, when you feel strongly about a man, and when you know him as well as you seem to know Mr. Manning, it doesn't sound like a passing inclination. If you need help or advice, I'm always here for you, but—"

"Mr. Strauss, wait. I'm not in love with Kirk. Far from it! His suggestion infuriated me."

He stopped, brow wrinkled, eyes wide.

“Ah. I see. Then why did you tell me—?”

“I ... I don’t really know.” She sighed and rubbed her forehead, an unladylike but necessary gesture. “I felt I must. He is a variable, I suppose. I hated to lose his friendship, and it’s been bothering me.”

“I see. Thank you for telling me, then, if it meant something to you.” He cleared his throat. “I think I see Mr. Ashfield looking for you—there? I’ll take you to him.” He extended his arm.

Alice forced her lips into yet another smile she didn’t feel. “No parting advice?”

Mr. Strauss took a deep breath, his eyes flitting about like a trapped animal. “If you love Kirk Manning—or if you love Gibson

Ashfield—or if you love anyone—your love can't harm them. In the end, I found I wanted Maddie to be Riley's more than I wanted her for myself. Perhaps, at the time, it was just because I wanted her to be happy, without regard for myself, but now I've found we wouldn't probably have gotten along. We're too much alike. Regardless, being honest can only benefit all parties involved. You wouldn't want to marry a man you didn't feel a solid bond with. Logic is important in a marriage, but, when not paired with feelings of some sort, logic can make your life miserable. Pray about it, and, when you're sure, act. Let God be your guide.”

Perhaps inspired by his words, truth

bubbled up again before she could stop it, a confession spilling from her lips. “I don’t know if I can listen anymore. I fail at letting God take control again and again.”

Mr. Strauss’s lips twitched, but his eyes remained serious. “I know it’s difficult. I struggle with needing to control my life in my own bumbling way from time to time, too. I just know that telling the truth can never hurt you.” He winced, and she wondered why. “Telling the truth is difficult, though, and I’m not living out my own words currently. So don’t go thinking you’re the only one who struggles.”

She didn’t believe him for a moment, but still, she’d allow him his delusions of sin

nature. She allowed all others in this world to possess some failures, but Peter Strauss seemed largely, and frustratingly, without them. “Thank you. For your advice and your empathy.”

Mr. Strauss led her across the room toward Gibson Ashfield, and Alice clung to his arm, her mind swirling over his words and the arguing voices in her head.

Kirk Manning, Gibson Ashfield, and Peter Strauss. Somehow her father’s face, Mr. Parker’s, her uncle’s, and so many other men’s flashed before her now. Her ideas of what a man, a husband, a father, a Christian was—and wasn’t. Finding a common denominator appeared to be part of the trick, and Gibson

Ashfield barely checked any of those boxes.

The only one he got a perfect, or even good, score on was ‘man.’ Was that enough? Was just a man, with no other qualifiers, enough?

Alice felt that it wasn’t. Yet how could she back out now?

In a low voice, Mr. Strauss murmured, “Nonetheless, a final word.”

She glanced sideways at him. “Yes?”

He sighed. “‘They stumble that run fast.’ Use caution.”

As if she could do anything but.

Chapter Twenty

Friday, July 9, 1880

Alice had taken to slipping into the small stable behind the house every morning to visit the horses and calm her mind. As Mr. Strauss had recommended, she prayed, but there was also a calmness that came from the smells of horses that permeated her soul.

So, when she stepped into the stables and came face to face with Kirk Manning, the distress, which she couldn't even express in front of her father, was great.

“There you are, Alice.” Papa,

thankfully, was oblivious to her plight. “Manning here is looking into some horses for me, and I wanted to review our present needs. He’s chasing down the Earl of Dalbury about the stud I mentioned, too; it would be a miracle if we got him for next year.”

Alice responded in what she hoped was a semi-interested and natural manner. She didn’t want Kirk to think he’d gotten to her; if that became true, she’d never forgive herself. She wanted him to see her as entirely unaffected, unfrustrated, and ready to let bygones be bygones.

Even though, of course, she hadn’t and, furthermore, was unwilling to allow any small amount of communication between them.

Which made the situation all the more difficult, because she had to rely on his anger, not her own, to carry them through the enforced silence.

Yet he ignored her, barely nodding in greeting, and continued the conversation without verbal acknowledgment, causing her father's brow to wrinkle in confusion. Even in front of him, Kirk and she had maintained a base level of friendship. So now, through his stupidity, this man had brought her father into the mess he'd created.

Perhaps that was a bit harsh. Even as Alice thought it, she winced and slipped into a stall to allow the shame to fade from her face, where she was sure it proudly resided,

showing off its snobbery with every small tremor of her facial muscles. It was a sad day when she'd lost her truest non-related, non-Cassie friend.

"I brought my mother and sister with me," he was saying, "to see London. I'm having a few renovations done to our home, such as it is, and I wanted my mother out of the house—I hope that's all right."

"Perfectly fine!" Papa replied, his voice a boom of natural cheer. Apparently, if he'd noticed something amiss between his daughter and his stable manager, he'd said nothing. "Where are they? They're always welcome to stay here, but, if you'd like, I'll include their lodgings in my travel expenses for you."

“No—that’s fine. I’ve already made arrangements.”

Alice smothered a snort. Made arrangements with his pride. Honestly, he owed enough to their family that he ought to stop making a fuss every time they tried to—

Then she stopped herself, checked her heart. Kirk might just have been right about her; she had snobbery in every pore, and she inflicted it on him more often than not. What did that say about her? Was it possible that Peter Strauss had been right in nudging her toward Kirk?

If so, it was too late now. Kirk hated her. And Gibson Ashfield and his parents were coming for dinner at the Knights’ tonight. She

felt certain a proposal was impending; her father had started to look secretive, for him, of late, and her mother tight-lipped. It was only a matter of time now. Though, she doubted it would be tonight; he'd ask her somewhere private, in the day. Nighttime proposals in front of his parents wouldn't suit Gibson Ashfield.

She wondered if her father had given him permission willingly, for he had plainly given permission. And were her mother's expressions of distaste lately an indication that she did not agree with this appraisal of Gibson Ashfield?

If he asked her for a private audience in the next several days, she'd take time to think

it out beforehand and ask her parents for their thoughts. She didn't want to rush into anything. Perhaps she could even delay things after the proposal? Was that something people did?

She hoped it was, for 'maybe' might very well be her answer to Gibson Ashfield at this point of her life. She wasn't even sure she liked him, much less wanted to marry him.

Yet he was the perfect match in all the ways that Alice had outlined before she even came to London.

What was a girl to do?

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The evening began normally enough. Alice enjoyed Gibson Ashfield's company about as much as she always did; he was amusing, and he was in rare form tonight—happy, cheerful, making jokes about everything and anything.

A few of his jokes were a bit off-color, but since he wasn't a serious Christian yet, she forgave him. Despite the fact that her mother's lips tightened with almost every word he said. Despite the fact that her parents exchanged worried glances.

The Ashfields themselves were a bit of a concern for Alice, however. They seemed stiff together, unnatural. She knew they'd hosted events together, and she'd seen them as a

couple. The tension wasn't always there exactly, but it lay below the surface. Tonight it was barely contained.

Her father's cousin Mr. Parker had come up from his home in Kent for a few days and was staying with them, and as Alice and the ladies passed into the drawing room, he followed her out and tapped her shoulder just before she entered the room.

“Could I have a word with you, Alice?”

She hesitated. He rarely spoke to her now that she was a young lady, though he'd always seemed to want to befriend her as a child. She'd believed years of coldness had finally paid off. “Why?”

“I want to tell you something about

your fiancé and his family.”

Alice flicked her eyes around, making sure everyone had passed on and they were alone. “He’s not my fiancé. Yet. But what is it?”

He, too, glanced around before speaking. “I knew your Mr. Ashfield’s father when he was a boy, in college. We ran in the same circles, and we often spent time together. Though I’m not one to judge, Alice, I think it worth mentioning that he was no saint, and his son is not much better, from the gossip I hear.”

That she knew. She’d heard some of the gossip, too. But she wasn’t sure it was true. “I ... don’t judge the man for his father.”

“Really? I would. I’m not saying that I do judge him, for I am no angel myself. I’ve done things worse than anything your Mr. Ashfield has. However, I wouldn’t have you hurt, and you would not be happy with anyone less than a saint. For whatever reason, perhaps because of your Nettie, for your mother never would’ve ingrained morals in you, you have turned out with beliefs, Miss Knight.” He grinned. “So I thought to warn you.”

Alice should slap him really, but he was always making off-handed comments about her mother, though never to Mother’s face. She didn’t believe him, and she refused to dignify his words with a response. So, instead,

she raised her chin and turned toward the drawing room.

“No.” He caught her arm and pulled her back, but Alice jerked away.

“I don’t want to hear it,” she hissed.

“I know you don’t.” He took a step back and held up his hands. “I know you don’t. You’re as stubborn as your mother, you know. That’s one of the few things you’ve in common with her. But I’m stubborn, too. So listen. I don’t know much about Mr. Jeremy Ashfield now, but I remember that, in the days of his youth, he was rough with women. Too rough.” He cleared his throat and again glanced about. “I won’t give you all the details, but if his son has any of those traits, well ...”

Offended, Alice frowned. The father was one thing, but the son? “He has never given me any reason to believe—”

“He wouldn’t. He would hide it. All men hide their violent sides while they’re courting; it’s just a fact of life, of humanity. They’re kinder to women they court, though perhaps there are signs: a dismissal of the woman’s concerns, for instance—a more physical manner of expressing anger, inconsistent moods. But, as I’ve said before, with another woman, I wouldn’t mention it, as all women should expect some rough treatment from their husbands. But I don’t think you’d like it much, so I’ll tell you now to watch where you tread with that man.”

Alice's lip curled in disgust. "Do you have any idea—?"

"I have a lot of ideas." Mr. Parker took another few steps back. "I'll leave you now. I just thought it worth mentioning. Look—I like you, Alice. I always have. I want you to have what you want out of life, and I don't think he's it." He disappeared back into the dining room, and Alice took a minute of standing in the dim hallway to reorganize her thoughts before joining the ladies.

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Saturday, July 10, 1880

As predicted, Gibson Ashfield had asked Alice to meet him the following morning for a walk to a nearby park. He arrived on time and escorted her there, talking of light things until they stepped out of the London streets and into the patch of green grass, small trees, and neatly-trimmed hedges.

“I suppose you’ve an idea why I’ve brought you here today.” He cast a slight smile at her, but his eyes remained serious. “I won’t stand on formality with you. I want to ask you to marry me.”

She said nothing, not sure how to respond to such an informal offer—or to any offer from him, regardless of the context.

“You know what I offer, and I know all

I need to about you. I want us to marry, because I think we'd have fun together, and I love you as much as I can. I'm not madly in love—or, at least, I don't know what that feels like—but I care about you, and I'd give you everything you want.” She felt his shoulders shrug slightly. “I also know that you're not like most of the girls my mother throws at me. Or their mothers throw at me ... I'm not sure who's doing the throwing, but, in this case, you weren't thrown, and it's my choice, and I find I like it that way.”

“I see.” No, not the most romantic, but that was exactly what Alice wanted. “I ... I'm very flattered of course.”

He rolled his eyes. “Can you please be

frank? You always have before. No woman is really flattered by a proposal; once the chase is over, flattery stops, and they're just cornered. But don't charm—for heaven's sake, bite."

She laughed a nervous laugh that even she didn't believe in. "I suppose, if I'm honest, I need time to think."

Gibson's eyebrows shot up. "Really? I'd have thought my intentions were quite clear. At least everyone's been saying that."

"They were! They are. But last night ..."

Could she blame Mr. Parker's words as the cause for all of her doubts? She'd had plenty, but his accusations were the most grounded ones she had to offer. "Last night, I spoke to

Mr. Parker, who is my father's cousin. You met him."

He raised his eyebrows. "... yes?"

"He knew your father when they were young, and he also seemed to know some details about your family." She swallowed, unsure if she wanted to push through, but Gibson nodded in encouragement.

"What did he say?"

"He ... he said your father was ... cruel to women." She forced the words out, hating the sound of them. Though it might be true, she didn't want to bring it up to Gibson. It wasn't his fault, after all. "He suggested you might be, too, but I didn't believe him."

Instead of the instant denial Alice had

expected, Gibson's face darkened, and he didn't speak for a long minute. "Ah. I see."

"Was what he said ...? That is, do you know what he might have been referring to?" Alice inquired. Perhaps he would be able to deny it or simply had no knowledge of it whatsoever.

"I have an idea, yes. My father is a complicated man." His lips pressed in a slim white line. "I don't know why, but he has always had a violent streak, and though I have never been the recipient, I have often thought—but I haven't known. It doesn't matter. *I* wouldn't hurt *you*—not on purpose."

"Oh." For whatever reason, that didn't reassure Alice. She wanted him to offer more

than a little disgust and perhaps some natural curiosity. She wanted him to offer to investigate his father's past and even find and defend anyone he might seek to hurt. Instead, he seemed content to not speak of the subject any further.

“Miss Knight, don't let my father come between us. He will be a part of our life, yes, but I won't let him be alone with you, ever, and I'll protect you. You don't need to fear anything from him. We're not even that close.”

“But surely if your father—”

“No. I don't want to discuss it.” He turned away from her, walked a few steps, then returned to her side. “Make the decision for us. We get along, don't we? I have never

raised a hand to you, and I won't."

Mr. Parker's words echoed in her head: *a dismissal of the women's concerns, for instance.* She wondered if this was a warning sign. What if she made a mistake that, for the rest of her life, sent her into a reality that was as close to Hell as earth could offer?

"The other thing I wanted to bring up"—she cleared her throat—"is the matter of Christianity. I cannot marry a non-Christian."

His brow furrowed. "But you can court one? You say that, Miss Knight, but you don't believe it. I say it again—make the decision for *us*. Don't include others—either of our parents and their needs, for instance. Don't consider them."

But she wanted to consider her parents' concerns as well as her own! And certainly the way he had been raised would factor majorly into the man he was today. "But, Mr. Ashfield —"

"No. Don't play with me." His face was growing angry now. "You didn't just draw me along for no reason. I've invested in you and —"

"And so now we are practically wed? That's simply not true! Give me a minute, please. You're not behaving in a gentlemanly way, and—"

His hand jerked up as if to strike her, and she stepped back, eyes wide. For a minute, they stood where they were, then

Alice turned and walked away.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tuesday, July 13, 1880

Peter shrugged his shoulders to adjust the set of his coat as he stepped out of the Ashfields' carriage and looked up at the Knight townhouse. A slight sigh caused his body to slump. Why were his friends always asking such uncomfortable things of him?

Of course, Gibson didn't know Peter was in love with Alice. Nonetheless, the situation was uncomfortable.

Gibson Ashfield had sent Peter to visit Alice and 'reason with her.' Apparently, the

proposal had gone in a direction that Gibson had found 'unforeseen and irritating.' He felt that Miss Knight had been unreasonable, too easily offended, and was basing her judgments of him on knowledge of his father's past.

Which wasn't too terribly unlike Miss Knight, though of course she had the right to refuse him for any reason whatsoever, regardless of its logic. However, he decided it was better for him to get her side of the story, and perhaps advise reason over the harsh feelings of an argument.

Miss Knight met him in the drawing room. Her face was drawn, but she worked hard to stay casual and relaxed as she greeted him.

“Gibson sent me to speak with you,” he said, deciding that the easiest path was to dive right in to the conversation. “He was quite concerned that you had the wrong impression of him, and he thought I might be able to ... to ease his way back to you.”

“Ah.” Miss Knight’s nose wrinkled ever so slightly, but otherwise she kept her face neutral. “I see.”

“Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity or registering wrongs.” Peter smiled. “That’s from *Jane Eyre*. I’ve found it holds true. However, I’d also like to say ... if you have made a decision, don’t let him bully you out of it. I’m here to hear your side of things.”

She sighed and lowered herself onto a chair. He took the one opposite her. “I’m not quite sure what ‘my side’ is myself. I didn’t truly reject him; however, I had some concerns, which he did not address to a comfortable level, in my opinion. I’d heard some rumors about his family—and about Mr. Gibson Ashfield himself—but he asked me to make my decision regardless of those rumors. I could not.”

“Ah.” That made sense. And of course she had wanted confirmation that there was no weight to whatever she had heard. That was perfectly reasonable. “But if they are just rumors—?”

“That’s just the thing. He did not say

that they were. Though, he perhaps implied that they might be true of his father but not of him ... I don't know. Despite that, there's the matter of his faith, or rather, the apparent lack of faith he espouses." Her deep breath caused her shoulders to shudder. "It means a great deal to me to marry a Christian, and I'd let go of that desire. But now I feel the vitalness of such a consideration."

"Ah, yes. I quite agree with you." He cleared his throat. "However, you'll want to let Mr. Ashfield in on those thoughts. He'll need a reason, I think, before he leaves you alone. I could tell him, if you like." Honestly, at this point, ending her relationship with Gibson would be a bit of a pleasure.

“No ... no. I’ll handle it myself.” She reached up as if to touch her forehead, then dropped her hand. “I ought to clean up my own messes. I’ve made enough of those of late, haven’t I?”

He didn’t feel qualified to comment on that.

She seemed to struggle for words before she continued. “I should, perhaps, have entertained the option of Mr. Manning. Kirk was ... *Kirk is* a great deal closer to the ideal man. He’s a Christian at least, and he cares for me.”

Ah. So she’d brought that man up again? That confirmed to Peter, once more, that she must be in love with this Kirk

Manning. Though she would struggle to admit it, at last her heart must triumph. Now that it seemed she was going to reject Gibson once and for all, this Manning fellow would become a part of her life again.

“Kirk might be my best chance, honestly. I do need to be married, and money doesn’t make a man.” She tapped her chin, and her eyes narrowed slightly. “I suppose it wouldn’t be so bad.”

“No, perhaps not,” he murmured. He didn’t want to discourage her, but her constant rationalism always made his responses uncertain. How could he know what she really wanted beneath all the layers of caution and planning that was Alice Knight? “If he’s the

man God wants for you, there is no reason why you shouldn't ... What I mean to say is, if God gives you a direction, follow it."

The slight toss of her hand indicated to Peter that she hadn't quite learned that particular lesson yet, but she still replied with a quick, "Of course. I'll do whatever God asks of me."

"Take a deep breath and pray hard," he suggested. "I'll speak to Mr. Ashfield and let him know that you will speak to him."

"Thank you. That would be much appreciated." She rose, and Peter scrambled to his feet, clutching his hat before it rolled off his knee.

He bid her good-bye and headed home

to update Gibson.

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“Miss Knight, Mr. Gibson Ashfield is waiting in the drawing room to see you.”

Alice, who had been staring out the window organizing her thoughts, nodded to the maid and rose.

Since Mr. Strauss had visited that morning, Alice’s resolve had only strengthened. Her rejection of Mr. Ashfield was a matter of fact to her now; she knew she must. Though she felt no mystic tug from God, she felt sure that it must be the right decision to reject him. However, she still felt nothing

toward Kirk, much to her frustration.

Couldn't she fall in love with him, break from her family, and find a quiet life with him? Although Kirk was by no means a safe option as far as lifestyles went, he was definitely a safe option as far as morals went. Could that be enough for her? Probably not. And the thought of having to actually marry Kirk made her skin crawl a little. He was so brotherly in her view that the very idea felt strange.

She made her way downstairs slowly, breathing in and out deeply. She wasn't at all sure how Gibson Ashfield would respond to her rejection.

Passing through the foyer, she noted

Mr. Parker's broad back disappearing into the shadows of the doorway leading to the servants' hall. She hung back, half-listening, and heard Mrs. Manning's voice.

"I didn't *promise* I'd keep him there, only that I would be faithful to my end of the bargain as long as you were. Besides, it's clear that no one has guessed. What I want to know is—"

"Never mind that." Mr. Parker's voice, harsh and allowing no argument, cut her off. "I just need your word—"

"Mr. Parker? Mrs. Manning?" Alice called. She had no idea what they could be talking about, but she couldn't, in good conscience, either continue to eavesdrop or

leave them alone.

The voices ended, and she heard female footsteps disappearing down the stairs even as Mr. Parker stepped out of the doorway and nodded to her. “Alice.”

“What was that about?”

He cocked his head. “It’s really none of your business, now is it?”

Surprised at the tone of steel in his voice, she stepped back. His face was too cold, and she shuddered. With Gibson Ashfield on her mind, she didn’t have time to fight Mr. Parker—and she wasn’t sure she wanted to. “Very well.” She raised her chin and continued into the drawing room.

“Miss Knight.” Gibson stood and walked

toward her.

She drew back, chest tight. Perhaps it was because of her encounter with Mr. Parker in the hallway, but something told her not to let him draw near her. “I think that’s close enough.”

His face dropped. “Really, Miss Knight. You don’t think I’d hurt you.”

“I don’t know what to think,” Alice said. That much was honest. Her thoughts were spiraling now, despite her careful analysis of them earlier.

“Of course, if that makes you more comfortable.” He returned to his seat, though his eyes said he wasn’t taking her too seriously.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to be calm. This was just a simple talk. Since he'd come to her, she might as well let him speak. "Have you anything to say?"

He nodded. "I've come to ask for forgiveness, Miss Knight. I'm afraid I've overstepped my bounds—"

"No, you didn't. I simply had objections I had not thought of previously." After all, she'd led him on. "I'm sorry that those came up so late in our relationship. But they are insurmountable for me. It's not about your father, really, though that concerns me. It has a great deal more to do with you not being a Christian."

For a long time, he said nothing, but his

brow tightened and his eyes narrowed slightly. “So what you’re saying is, after courting me, and after my constant honesty about who I am as a person, you have suddenly developed ethics?” An incredulous smile quirked his lips up. “That feels a bit hypocritical, doesn’t it?”

“I know it looks that way.” Alice gripped her hands together. “But I was stuck in my stubbornness and ... and my pride. I wanted you to like me, and I thought I could change you. But of course I can’t.”

“Of course you can’t!” He jerked to his feet, and she imitated him. “Miss Knight, this is entirely unreasonable. I’ve invested too much in you for you to back out now. I can’t help but think that finding out that my father

may or may not have made mistakes in his youth is the primary factor here. But it's none of my concern what my father chooses to do with his time. As long as he's discreet—"

That was it. She couldn't be civil if he spouted that kind of logic. "That's enough. Get out."

He scowled. "What?"

"Get out of my house."

His face reddened with anger, and he stepped forward again. "Your house? May I remind you that you don't own anything, Miss Knight, and that—"

"I'm not to be tempted by pecuniary gain; trust me, I considered marrying a stable boy once." *Granted, I was twelve—but why*

mention that detail to him?

“You are being unreasonable.” His fists clenched. “You’re ruining this for no reason! I’m warning you, Miss Knight, if I walk out of that door today, I’ll never walk back into it. If you want any semblance of security in your life, you’ll learn to put aside your unreasonable beliefs, or else you’ll never find a man willing to take you on.”

There was some sort of snap in her mind, and she felt a sort of weightlessness, a moment when she finally felt as if she’d be all right. The words came out before she quite knew where they came from: “Nothing could make me happier than to be a spinster, if it were God’s plan for me.”

“God’s plan! I can’t believe you’d—”

“Stop. I don’t want to hear any more,” said Alice. “Now, I’d like you to leave. If you don’t, I’ll be forced to ring for Mr. Marlin, and he’ll—”

In three strides, Gibson crossed the room and threw Alice to the ground. She fell against an end table and crumpled. Pain throbbed in her temples, and her vision went black.

Oh, God ...

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Peter jogged up the steps of the Knights’ home and rang the doorbell. He hadn’t

intended to bother Gibson and Alice while they were speaking, but something had told him to follow shortly after Gibson left. Here he was, for no real reason, making a fool of himself.

The middle-aged butler greeted him at the door. "Miss Knight and Mr. Ashfield are in the drawing room, Mr. Strauss. I'll—"

Alone in the drawing room? *Go to her.* Something told Peter to ignore the butler, to walk across the foyer, and throw open the door. The sight that greeted his eyes made his blood run cold.

Alice lay curled up on the floor, clutching her head, while Gibson Ashfield stood over her. He looked up at Peter, his eyes

shocked as if he didn't know what he had done. However, his emotions were not as important to Peter at that moment as Alice's apparent pain.

"Ashfield, step away from her," Peter said as he dropped on his knees at her side.

"She's not worth it, anyway," Gibson spat out, but his voice held no conviction.

She doesn't deserve it; that's for sure. "I think it's in your best interest for you to stop talking and leave. Now."

Gibson glanced at Alice, fear plain on his face, then half-ran out of the room. Peter placed his hand on Alice's shoulder.

"Alice? Alice, answer me!"

She moaned and opened her eyes. "Mr.

Strauss?”

“That’s right. I’m here. What do you need? Is there anything I can get you?”

Alice blinked and pushed herself up onto her elbow. “No, I don’t think so. I might need to lie down, but ... my mother. I’d like my mother.”

“I’ll have the butler fetch her.” Peter rose and ran into the foyer. He motioned to the butler. “Miss Knight is ill. Will you call her mother? And she may need to be carried to her room. She’s taken a fall.”

The butler’s eyes widened, and he hurried off. A footman next to the door followed Peter into the room. Peter knelt beside her once again.

“Alice, are you awake?” he whispered.

Before she could reply, he heard a soft gasp behind him and turned to see Ivy standing in the door. “Alice!” She darted forward and knelt next to her twin. “Are you all right?”

“Ivy. Yes, I think so. C-can you hold me?”

Ivy nodded and drew Alice’s head onto her lap. “It’s all right, dearest. Mama’s coming. She’ll be here soon.” Ivy looked up at him then. “What happened, Mr. Strauss?”

Peter opened his mouth, but something about the sweet innocence in her eyes stopped him. “She took a fall. I think against the table, though I’m not sure.”

Ivy nodded. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

Peter touched her shoulder. “You’re very welcome.”

Alice stirred and looked up at him. She seemed alert enough, and her pupils were regular-sized as far as he could tell. There was no blood. Everything within him crumbled. *She will be all right.* His relief was so great he felt like collapsing onto the floor himself.

He straightened, knees a bit wobbly. He turned toward the door. “I hear your mother on the stairs; I’ll speak with her on my way out. Just remember, God is with you, Alice. ‘You are human and fallible.’ Another *Jane Eyre* quote, I know, but you are also a child of

God. Remember that in all you do.”

A slight smile touched her lips. “Thank you, Mr. Strauss.”

“You’re welcome.” He hesitated. She didn’t need to hear more of his preaching, but he couldn’t leave her without knowing she’d seek God in this. “I hope you’ll let Him guide your life. His ways are perfect.”

Her head moved slightly in what might be a nod. “Thank you.”

Peter smiled; she wasn’t in any mood to speak about this, but hopefully the words would come to her later and prove helpful. This would be the last time he saw her, likely, but he couldn’t linger. She’d be all right, and that was enough. With any luck, she’d recover

quickly and find her way to her Kirk Manning. Peter saw Mrs. Knight out of the corner of his eye. "Here's your mother. Good-bye, Miss Knight."

Chapter Twenty-Two

July 14, 1880

Alice's family had been in an uproar of constant fussing, and she was tired of it. They'd talked about getting Gibson Ashfield arrested and about having Alice see a doctor. In due time, a doctor arrived, but she'd managed to convince them to not pursue legal action with Mr. Ashfield. Something told her getting her family in trouble with that particular family was a bad idea, and it certainly wouldn't help further erase her own family's sordid past from the memories of

upper class society.

The doctor had diagnosed her with a small bump on her head and a prescription for less stress in the future, but that wasn't enough to keep her in bed, and she made her way down to the garden to sit and think.

There was a small but neat garden with a little bench Alice seated herself on. This allowed her peace and quiet to think. The first time she went, she simply sat, but the next day, she brought a Bible and a journal.

Alice had made a lot of mistakes, and done all the wrong things, and she was no longer able to ignore it. Instead of hopping from one plan to another, she needed to settle in and allow God to do the planning—not her.

She wasn't sure she'd completely learned the lesson. She hadn't lived it, after all, so what proof was there? But she knew now that there was not much within her control—especially in regards to factors like marriage—and that everything was in His hands, regardless of her own feelings.

Halfway through the New Testament—for Alice could do nothing in halves—a servant appeared with a tray.

“Miss Knight, there's been a letter for you.”

She stood, thanked the servant, and took the letter. It was a slip of paper folded many times over, and she unfolded it to find it covered with cramped, messy handwriting.

She resumed her seat and began to read.

Dear Miss Knight,

Today I will be on a boat back to Philadelphia and home. My articles are written, and I miss my family, plus I feel there is not much more for me here. Thank you so much for your hospitality! I've written a similar note to your parents, but you can share this one with them, too, if you like.

You're a wonderful woman. Though you, like me, have your faults, don't let anyone tell you that those overcome your strengths. I see so much potential in you, and it is clear that your faith in God is sincere. Rest in Him—and I do

mean rest. You can always have peace in Christ.

I valued our friendship. Thank you for that. I needed someone to keep me from hiding in my room while I was in England, and you were that person.

Sincerely,

Peter Strauss

P.S. My mother would quote Jeremiah 29:11-13 to you, as she so often has to me, and it's a good one, but Psalm 127:1-2 would be my favorite.

Alice let the paper drop to her lap. She knew Jeremiah 29:11-13 well enough. It was Nettie's favorite. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of

peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart

She believed it. She did. And yet her compulsive, anxious need to control every situation got in the way of this belief, to the point where it obscured it, to the point where it ceased to exist altogether.

Mr. Strauss was the only person who really believed she could change, she felt. Nettie believed, and Mother probably did, but that was their responsibility; they were both, in a way, her mother, and a mother didn't have a choice. However, Mr. Strauss did, and

he still had hope.

Alice might as well keep up hope, too.

She flipped her Bible open to Psalms and found the verses he'd recommended: *Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so He giveth His beloved sleep.*

The words echoed about in her heart, and she was obliged to scribble them down in her journal and then stare at them in blank amazement. "How did that man always know the right thing to say?" she murmured. "So He giveth His beloved sleep." Of course her life

had become increasingly hectic and confusing. Of course she lacked even a basic level of understanding and peace.

She needed God's rest, God's 'sleep' for his beloved. Everything she did was in vain, but it was also exhausting, empty. But, with God, all things were possible ... it just required Alice to give up and give in.

Alice sighed and dropped her face in her hands. Deep breath in, deep breath out. Ivy had said that quite often to her in the last few days—she had an idea that it was a secret mantra of some kind. But it worked, cleared Alice's head, though she of course wouldn't allow she had as much need for head-clearing as Ivy.

There it was. A stab, a dart in the very heart of her. Her head jerked up, and she realized with a blush that she did have a conscience, and her conscience had just informed her that her manner of referring to her sister was un-Christian.

“Oh, Lord, guide me,” she whispered. “Give me more stabs of conscience. Allow me to conform to Your will. I ... I can’t keep living like this.”

She sat in silence for some time, waiting for something she could not name.

“Miss Knight?”

Her head jerked up, both at the familiar tone and the unfamiliar greeting. She turned slightly on the bench and attempted a smile.

“Kirk?”

“I heard you took a fall, but I’m glad you’re recovering.” His dear face, as sweet and open and, curse her stubborn absentee emotions, *brotherly* as ever, was cool but not quite as distant. Though she didn’t want him, not in the way he wanted her, she couldn’t help but be grateful they would not spend the rest of their lives as enemies.

“It was nothing. I’m quite recovered.” As well as one can be. Her soul felt it’d taken quite the beating, but there was no bandage, no doctor for that, except God and His slowest creation, time.

Kirk didn’t speak for a long time, though he seemed to try to, his jaw working

and his eyes flashing over her face with their characteristic sharpness. He looked tired, Alice thought—like a man with a great weight on his shoulders—and there was a new anger in him somehow.

A dark anger. An anger that could not be caused by her. What had happened?

“Is your mother well?” she said, not sure what had prompted the query, but it seemed that something must be wrong. “Your sister?”

His green eyes blinked slowly, as if that simple question was difficult to process. “Y-yes. They are both well.”

Now he was stuttering? “Are *you* well?”

Kirk’s lips twitched, and he shook his

head, a raw chuckle escaping his throat. “No, I’m not, but nothing’s really wrong with me, either. That’s why I came to see you, actually—or rather, I came to apologize.”

“What?” He wasn’t well, but there was nothing wrong with him? He’d come to see her because nothing was wrong with him—or to apologize? “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“No, and you won’t.” He crossed his arms but remained several yards away from her, his eyes still bridging the distance they held between them, as they always had. “No, you won’t. I simply want to apologize for not taking your word when you said you weren’t interested in ... in furthering our relationship. That was unfair of me, and rather ignoble,

especially given my ungentlemanly assumptions upon your character. I've since realized that we never could have been all I wanted, and I wanted you to know that."

Alice hadn't known she would be relieved by such statements until a veritable tidal wave of a sigh cascaded out of her. However, he wasn't the only one who'd perhaps been too harsh. "I was wrong, too, Kirk. I was cruel when I could've been understanding, and maybe I did lead you on, but I honestly didn't know I was. I could've told you years ago that I wouldn't marry you! I've known since I was fourteen or fifteen that I wouldn't, but I never thought to tell you, because ... I thought you knew. But we have

always been frank with each other.”

He nodded. “That’s why, perhaps, it was such a shock. I thought you would’ve told me if you wanted me to leave.”

That was the complicated thing—Alice felt such a kinship, a sense of siblinghood with Kirk, that she had never wanted him to leave. Not for a moment. Now he would of course—or rather, they’d never be as close as they had been if they managed any sort of friendship. But at least they weren’t going to be cold to each other. She didn’t know what to say to that, so she simply nodded.

“It’s over for me now, though. I promise you that—I won’t bother you again. In fact ... at this point, through no fault of your own ...

In the interest of frankness, even if you were to change your mind—which I think we both know you never do, but in the almost impossible and most improbable case—I ... would no longer be interested.”

“Oh.” That seemed harsh. She hadn’t been *that* cruel. Or perhaps she had. Alice was beginning to realize her reality did not belong to everyone else in the world as completely as it did to her. “Thank you for being honest.”

He winced. “I’m sorry that I had to say that, but I promised—this is going to sound strange, Alice, and you mustn’t question me—I promised my mother I would make it clear. When we were in London, she noticed our coldness, and I told her parts of the story, and

...” Kirk’s jaw clenched. “Never mind. I told her I would not reveal the details, but she gave me some information I had not previously been in possession of.”

Alice rose and tucked the letter still clenched in her hand between the pages of her Bible. Leaving them there, she took a few steps toward Kirk and examined his face. He looked close to tears.

“You’re not all right,” she announced, perhaps unnecessarily, for he knew that—but she wanted it to be spoken aloud. “Did she disapprove of me? Was it—?”

“No, no! Not of you. Never of you. She likes you,” he said, the words coming out at the right speed for hasty honesty. “It’s not

that. I promise it has nothing to do with you. But, at the same time, it has everything to do with you, and I just think it's bloody unfair—" He snapped the words out, but she, once again, had to correct him.

"Kirk, *please*."

"It is, Alice! It's unfair. Through no fault of mine, and none of yours, and barely any of even our parents'—likely none of yours. It's not fair, and yet we have to live with this. I know you don't want me, but *I ... want ... you*. It's not fair that I don't get to try, but I don't."

She shifted uncomfortably. There *were* tears in his eyes, and she didn't understand what was upsetting him—she supposed just

his being forced to accept her rejection? After he'd comforted her while she wept so many times, why was she so tongue-tied and frozen on the spot while he suffered?

Yet, if this was about her, any frail attempt to make it better would make it worse in the end. She swallowed. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I wanted it to be you. Or I did once I realized that ... It doesn't matter. But I don't love you. It'd be like marrying my brother."

He made an odd laughing sound in the back of his throat and rolled his eyes toward the sky. "You have no idea."

Frustration mixed with her long friendship with him and caused her to say,

“Tell me. Just tell me what’s keeping you from, as you say, *trying*?”

“I can’t. I promised. It would change too many things. Mother says—” He swallowed and dashed his sleeve over his eyes, and her heart squeezed with nostalgia. “Never mind what she says. *I* say it would be more pain than pleasure to hear it.”

Now it was her turn to sigh and glance upwards. “Now you *have* to tell me.”

“I don’t intend to. I’ve got to go now—I said I wouldn’t be long. Just know I would lay down my life for you and yours, Miss Knight, any time you need it. It simply must be as a friend, and always as a friend.”

There was a set of his jaw that

indicated to Alice that there would be no budging, and the recent rawness of his feelings made her reluctant to push him at any rate. They bid each other stilted good-byes, and he left the garden.

For a long time, Alice sat still and thought and tried to reason through his words to some easy conclusion ... but it would not come. At last, she had to accept the possibility that she wouldn't know for now, or perhaps might never know.

Whatever the reason, Kirk Manning had made it clear he was leaving her life for good.

Chapter Twenty-Three

July 19, 1880

Creling, Kent

The steam swirled about the station at Creling as the Knights disembarked from their train. Alice found herself watching it, mind far from her mother's talk about this and that. Mother had been rambling all day—the kind of rambling one did when there was a bigger issue to be discussed that no one wanted to.

Alice had asked to come home, and it was as simple as that. She was done; she didn't want to play the game anymore. She wanted a

reprieve from London, from society, from all the expectations she never had properly fulfilled ... that perhaps she never would.

Her mother didn't understand exactly, but she had respected Alice's wishes, and now they were going home to Pearlbelleville Park.

A kind of numbness had taken over after Alice's original upset over the revelation of Mr. Ashfield's true character—or rather, her stubborn self allowing her to grasp the knowledge of his character. It was probably the latter; she could be so stubborn, and she was starting to realize that the faults of this character trait were not necessarily playing equally with the strengths.

Yet the numbness allowed her to not

properly address this feeling, and she appreciated that. She was sick of the continuous prodding and pushing her soul was going through, and she had wanted to go home and sort it out.

Of course, Papa had agreed in an instant, and Mother afterwards, hesitantly, as she saw his mind and Alice's were well made up.

Alice's only regret was that she'd not managed to stay to the end for Cassie's sake; however, though her friend was not yet engaged, she would be shortly. It was clear that Mr. Montgomery's intentions were serious, and apparently his conversations with Cassie had been more and more clearly

matrimony-minded. Alice suspected Cassie's next letter would indicate a happy occasion in progress.

Alice was happy for Cassie, too. Very happy. She just wished that her next Season, if she had a next Season, would not be alone. She would miss Cassie, though perhaps she might spend a great deal of time with her even after she was married. In Alice's mind, matrimony was sure to end a great deal of relationships as more important concerns came up, but she might not be right. She prayed she wasn't right.

Whatever her quandaries, she was home and safe. She didn't have to worry about how she was perceived, about what people

thought, about whether she'd made the correct greeting, said the correct things. She could relax—and, if there was a next time, she could be ready.

The carriage ride back to Pearlbelleville Park was then filled with Ivy's babblings about her plans now that they were home. They mostly involved the little ones, and Alice remembered, with an exhausted sigh, that she would have to be cheerful and engaged for her younger siblings. Perhaps she'd just slip away, and, for once, allow Ivy the joy of their presence.

Mother's eyes were worried. Was Alice acting too melancholy again? She straightened her shoulders and attempted a smile. She

supposed there was a bit more acting to do; she didn't want her family to pity her. She didn't want anyone to know her plans had failed.

Her heart ached, and she bit her lip. She was doing it again—letting pride and stubbornness pull her away from those she loved. She'd rather appear strong and reject vulnerability than have a close relationship with her family. But she wasn't strong; she was weak, and every time she failed to show her weakness, she became weaker.

The carriage arrived, and Alice did her utmost to be in the present with her family, to greet each of the children cheerfully. Caleb was especially excited to see her, as always,

and she found herself quite enthusiastic about him in response. She'd missed him, and, though he was no longer of an age to allow cuddles that lasted longer than a brief hug, she did manage to convince him to sit near her and tell her all about his time while she was gone. She always felt children were a little unsafe, and entirely disorganized, and, therefore, never as secure as she preferred. However, in this case, Caleb offered a comforting simplicity to Alice that she more than appreciated.

However, she excused herself as soon as she could and walked down to the gatehouse. It hadn't been intentional, exactly—more the impulse of the moment, of a distracted mind—

but she found herself knocking on the door, found it opened, found Nettie's arms around her, and she couldn't complain.

“Aren't you home early?” Nettie began without a second of hesitance. “I just heard from the big house that you were arriving home today, and I couldn't believe it. Did something happen?”

Alice nodded, but, oddly enough, there wasn't an accompanying rush of emotion. She felt badly for having inconvenienced everyone, and a little strange for having failed to finish off her first Season with the thoroughness she'd intended, but, otherwise, there wasn't any grief. She had done what she was supposed to do, and that was leave Gibson

Ashfield and all the rest of London behind—and come home.

“The man who was courting me—Gibson Ashfield. He tried to hurt me. I mean, he was angry, and I’d rejected him, and he pushed me, but I ...” She stopped herself, determined to find a reasonable way of communicating what had happened. “I’m well, though. I asked to come home, because I was just tired of it. Peter Strauss left for America, and—” Again, she paused, not sure how or why that played into the tale. She missed him, yes, but he hadn’t really been a part of her life, not exactly. It was overly sentimental to say otherwise. “I wanted to come home.”

“And you did, and now all is well?”

Nettie gestured toward the table. "Sit. The children are out playing, so we can chat."

Alice lowered herself onto a chair, and her fingers traced over the familiar grains of the wood. She found that, despite her eagerness to take the bit between her teeth and run, all the things she had known since the days of her youth were infinitely more comforting than all the bright and shiny newness in the world. She wondered vaguely if it were always so, or perhaps only so for people like her. She did appreciate some tradition.

"Breathe in, breathe out," Nettie said, back to Alice as she fiddled with the stove, "and tell me everything. Start to finish."

Alice didn't know how she'd remember everything, but, as soon as she began, she was sucked away into the telling. Details she hadn't even recalled until she spoke them came to life, and she told Nettie all the things she hadn't even known herself until, at last, she was emptied.

Then she sat there, the remains of her tea sloshing darkly at the bottom of her cup, and waited for Nettie's comments, good or bad. Likely bad. Alice had been so heedless for so long; how could Nettie find the grace in this situation? Yet, in the end, after the scolding, she was sure Nettie would. She always did.

"I wish Mr. Strauss was still here," was all Alice's former governess said.

Alice blinked. Mr. Strauss had taken a small role in the story, true, but it wasn't much of one. Certainly not enough for Nettie to ignore all previous happenings and focus in on this tiny one. "I suppose so."

Nettie's eyes moved over Alice's face, probing her soul, asking questions her lips never could. "You are not sad to see him go?"

"I was. I am! But that doesn't mean I'm involved with him." Honestly, despite her former protestations of being above matchmaking, Nettie couldn't let the subject drop. She apparently thought Alice and Mr. Strauss were well suited.

They were, in some ways. Even Alice could admit that. She wanted to continue

being friends with him. She wished he could be a part of her life. Perhaps, if he had been a suitor, if he had crossed that boundary, she would have welcomed it. At least, once Mr. Ashfield was out of the way, she would have welcomed it.

“I don’t dislike the idea. Or I haven’t lately. However, Nettie, you must know it’s not possible.” It never really had been. He saw her as a girl, not a woman, or simply as a close friend, even if he did grant her maturity.

“You don’t dislike the idea?” Nettie chuckled. “I thought before that you would never consider marrying Peter Strauss.”

“Yes, well.” Things had changed. She had changed. Though she wasn’t at all sure

how she would react if Peter Strauss showed up out of nowhere and asked her to marry him, she imagined she'd want to enter a courtship. He was the type of man who didn't leave room for a lot of doubts, and she didn't feel she would hesitate with him. However, that wasn't a possibility. "He's back in America now, and he never was interested in me."

"Hmm. But if he were here, and if he were interested—?"

"Why does it matter?" The simple fact was that it didn't, and it wasn't fair of Nettie to bring it up, to make her long for things she could never have. She could long for Peter Strauss, she felt, if she allowed herself;

perhaps she might even feel grief, regret. However, that wasn't a good idea.

“Just for the sake of understanding the story.” Nettie laid her palms on the table, a mix of surrender and encouragement. “Alice, if you love Peter Strauss, I wouldn't have you hide it from me—or from yourself. It's something you could confide, you could admit to yourself and to me, in the safety of this room; I would never judge you for what I myself encouraged. Besides, I don't know if you've noticed, but I love you very much.”

Alice laughed a little. Yes, of course Nettie wouldn't judge her—and of course Nettie loved her. It was just that some things weren't worth dragging out in the daylight

when they would only wither. Perhaps that was a good thing, but a part of her didn't want the pain of self-examination before the inevitable changes it would bring. At the moment, she was living without full knowledge of how she felt; however, once she started talking to Nettie about Peter Strauss, she wouldn't be able to stop, and soon as she wasn't able to stop, her feelings would betray her. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do, my stubborn, stubborn girl!" Nettie rose and reached across the table, collecting Alice's teacup with a practiced sweep of her hand. "I'll make you more tea. Think about how you're going to manage

honesty—with yourself and then with me.”

Alice sighed as Nettie bustled about the kitchen. She kept her eyes focused on her hands, now clasped in front of her. Nettie was right. She wasn't being honest. But Nettie was wrong; it did not matter.

She believed she had special feelings for Peter Strauss, but he was back in America. She probably wouldn't be good for him anyway; he was better than her, and he probably didn't care about her in any way beyond what his natural loving nature demanded.

Even if she were madly in love with him—even if his name made her stomach clench, and even if she wanted him in her life, and even if all the things Nettie seemed to

suspect were true, it didn't matter.

Nettie set a second cup of tea in front of her and resumed her seat. "I've been watching your face, and, my Grace, I know what you're thinking. There is no hope, so why bother? I'll give you an answer. Because if you let anything sit within you, good or bad, it becomes corrupted. If you let it out, you move forward—if you must—but in the end, regardless, it must come out. If it doesn't, you will torture yourself for far longer. There has never been a feeling, a thought, a sin, a secret smothered that hasn't come out in the end. The longer it takes, the darker it feels, and someday you will look back and ask yourself, 'Why was I not honest when it was easy?'"

Alice chuckled, trying to ease the tension in her stomach. “You seem to speak from experience.”

Nettie’s nod in reply was quick, almost jerky. “I do. Experience, observation, head and heart knowledge. I’ve lived a bit longer than you, Gracie, and in my life, I have suffered. Ask Tom if you don’t believe I have struggled with what I could not tell one person or another.”

Alice raised her eyebrows. Perhaps it was just the track her mind went on—for, after all, this was Nettie, who, by all accounts, had lived a tame and virtuous life—but she couldn’t help think of all sorts of scandal when her friend spoke of secrets. “What sorts of

secrets have you had to keep? Other than the obvious.” Of course Nettie had known the story of Alice’s parents from the beginning, but that hadn’t really been her burden to bear, even though she’d taken it on. Nettie seemed to have no problem, no selfishness, when it came to Mother’s and Alice’s and Ivy’s troubles. It was one of the things that made her Nettie—one of the reasons Alice wanted to be her, even as she didn’t know how to begin growing in that direction.

“The best and the worst sorts.” Nettie shrugged. There was a firm set of her jaw, and Alice could tell that the words were said without thought. She understood those moments, when bearing memories wasn’t a

possibility, and, therefore, one referred to them vaguely and moved on swiftly, not allowing grief to knock its way into the descriptions one gave. “The kind I still can’t tell, and the kind that don’t even matter anymore. I believe that, without knowing them, you can trust my experiences—and tell me!”

Alice so longed to remain strong, stubborn, and whole—or at least to pretend she was whole. However, that wasn’t what God was asking of her right now, and it was plainly not what Nettie felt was best. Despite all her hemming and hawing, Alice did trust Nettie entirely. “Very well. I think I am at least attracted to Mr. Strauss, and I certainly

regard him highly—higher than any other man of my acquaintance. I would consider it a feeling directly linked to the romantic, even. However, that doesn't matter."

"There we are! At last, we have arrived, despite your continued insistence upon formal speech—are we quite sure you're not the writer of the pair?" Her fingers drummed the table thrice as her gray eyes grew increasingly focused on Alice's face. "So you're in love with him, or you find him attractive? You simply must choose. Is it lust? Is it loneliness, longing, curiosity? Is it a desire for what he can give you? Or does it touch something in you that practically forces sacrifice?"

"Sacrifice?" She had nothing to

sacrifice, not when it concerned Peter Strauss. Besides, she would not see him again. She would not. So whether it was love, lust, or something else entirely, the emotion must be weeded out.

“Mmhmm. Marriage will demand you deliberately choose the action of love, but the feelings of being *in* love can make us willing, eager, to commit to that sacrifice, even if one should be able to, with God’s help, make it without involving the original emotion. If you look at a man and you know that you would lay your life down for him, in whatever way it was required of you, that—*that* is the type of spark you need. It’s only a spark. That’s all being in love is—the beginning, the moment

that ignites, the feeling. Everything else is hard work.”

“Everything else?” Alice smirked; she rather doubted that. She’d seen how Nettie looked at Tom, more romantic to her than a thousand looks cast between her parents—she never was quite sure why, but it struck her as soon as the words were out that perhaps Nettie had a firmer appreciation for that work, a firmer dedication to completing it, and her marriage suffered a few more occasional sparks as a result.

Though, perhaps that was too harsh on Mother and Papa, for she knew they tried. Oh, they’d tried so hard! And they would keep fighting. But everything seemed to come so

much easier to Nettie than to the rest of the world.

“Maybe not everything else.” She smiled, too, and leaned her chin against her hand, elbow resting on the table. “But most of it. And it’s such a uniquely consuming relationship that your ability to do all else is impacted largely by your ability to remain faithful to that work. I do quarrel with Tom, contrary to what you seem to think, and we struggle like any couple. I’m a great deal more of a handful than I think you know, Gracie—I may be quiet about it, but I’m full as stubborn as you are, and I almost always think I’m right.”

“You are always right!” Alice protested.

Even in her most obstinate moments, she must admit that Nettie gave the soundest advice and possessed the deepest wisdom of anyone she'd ever spoken to.

“Indeed, am I? My, I should have you have my arguments with Tom for me! I might come out the victor more often.” She chuckled. “Though, there is no victor in marriages. There is no winner of every fight; if one of you tries to be, you both lose. The oneness is so strange, especially if you're not really ready for it. It takes so much knowledge of yourself and inner strength to commit to letting go of yourself ... But we'll discuss that at a later date. The point is, my marriage is far from perfect, but I love that man, and I always

will, because we promised each other we would. The feeling is not important.”

Alice tossed her hands into the air, almost knocking one into her teacup. “You’re confusing me, Nettie. You tell me you must know if I am in love, and then you go on to tell me that being in love doesn’t matter.”

“It *doesn’t* matter, but it’s so nice, isn’t it?” Nettie straightened in her chair. “I did fall for Tom, desperately; I’ve told you that. And I fought it, too, with every one of my fears and all of my sensible reasons that I couldn’t be married first and foremost in my mind. But God was determined to make me experience those emotions; I doubt I would have chosen him otherwise. I doubt I would have chosen

anyone. Sometimes God uses love to force us to be with the person He's always wanted us to be with."

Alice winced; another little jerk in her soul, or perhaps just in her stomach, told her *pay attention*, and she wanted to moan in annoyance. She couldn't do this. She couldn't. The twisting in her gut, the tightness in her throat, the longing in her heart ... She couldn't do any of it. It was too late. This feeling must be smothered before it had a chance to hurt her further.

"But," Nettie continued, "if you're really in love, and not just infatuated or experiencing a baser attraction or obsessed with your own perfect future, you will also

long to sacrifice. You will long to give yourself up for the man in question, and your love will be unconditional. So, for the sake of knowledge, tell me: when you think of Mr. Strauss, you might feel a rush of excitement, fear, and longing—but, beyond that, are you willing to give yourself up for him?”

The reply came to her without thought or reason. Of course she would make the choice to love him if given the opportunity. Of course she would, for he was Peter, and Peter had become infinitely dear to her over the past few months. Dearer than any other man of her acquaintance—dearer than Father and Mother, dearer than Ivy, dearer than her other siblings. She would have to fight herself to choose

anyone else but him first, even the people who she currently owed more obligation to.

She would give herself up for Peter Strauss, because it was he she loved. Oh, why had Nettie made her think of it? It was unfair. Alice never had been able to admit anything until it was too late, and now it was too late. Disastrously too late.

She felt her vision get a bit foggy and quickly looked away.

“I see.” Nettie leaned back on her seat. “Yes, I do see. Please tell me you gave him a hint.”

“I didn’t think of it. It didn’t matter. It *doesn’t* matter.” She’d keep saying that until it was true.

“Very well.” Nettie cocked her head. “But, if he were here now and willing to pursue you ...?”

“Then there would be no question of my acceptance of his suit.” Alice swallowed hard, telling her feelings to compose themselves. “But, though I may have feelings for him—perhaps I am in love; I don’t know; I’ve never been before—that doesn’t mean I’ll act unreasonably.”

“Of course not. Though, if you need to be sad, if you need to feel disappointed, don’t deny yourself. Not unnecessarily.” Nettie reached across the table and placed her hands over Alice’s. “I believe there must be some suffering attached to being in love, when it is

unrequited. I know you will be strong, so I must encourage you to allow, in some small areas, weakness. Besides, if you refuse to allow grief, you'll begin that bottling up again, and it'll only lead to negative consequences."

Not quite content with the way Nettie's hands folded over hers, Alice rose, circled the table, and pulled Nettie into a hug. "Thank you."

"No, thank you for coming to see me. I've wondered since the picnic. I could tell you were on the edge of being in love then, if not there already. He ... I'm not at all sure he didn't have feelings for you, Miss Grace. But you're right—it probably doesn't matter now that he's gone." She gave Alice an extra

squeeze for good measure. “Stay strong. God is working in you. I can see it.”

Could she? Good, for Alice couldn't. But, when she looked back, she supposed she did see some marks of growth, and she was determined to grow further still. To become a woman of Christ before she was an Englishwoman, a daughter, or a future wife.

Chapter Twenty-Four

September 18, 1880

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Strauss family and their various friends and relations were in high spirits this evening. Peter did his best to celebrate with them, but it was hard: First, because he was supposed to be the center of attention, and he never did a very good job of being the center of attention. And second, because he had been morose for months now, and nothing was going to make it better any time soon, and he might as well give up. Ever since that July day

when he'd boarded the ship for home and stared back at London as they steadily made their way into the channel and then out to sea, his fingers gripping the boat rail, he'd felt his heart breaking a little more.

Apparently, the second time wasn't any easier than the first. But this was a harsher heartbreak. A heartbreak he didn't feel God in. Unlike with Maddie, when all his regrets had been self-made, he'd had pangs since that July day when he'd left her that said he'd had a chance with Alice Knight.

It was an odd sensation, having God so directly tell him something. Usually it was vague feelings if it was anything at all. But, in the moment, Peter knew exactly the message

he was supposed to take away: *you should have stayed; you should have asked her.*

But ask her what? He'd glared at the clouds and at the ceiling of his cabin and at the seagulls perched on the ship and tried to puzzle this out. He had nothing to offer. She wasn't even interested in him romantically. Why was God so emphatic that Peter had a chance? God must be wrong. Peter couldn't have had a chance with her.

Every time he arrived at that thought, he had to check himself, for that couldn't be true. God was always right. If God said something was so, it was. So Peter was left in agony, knowing he'd lost yet another chance—and, unlike with Maddie, this one had been

different. *Alice* was different.

But she was with Kirk Manning now. She had a suitor; the last thing she needed was some random American author with a crush showing up and declaring his love, awkward and bumbling thing that he was. And, as he sailed across the ocean, he'd argued with God's reasoning in every way he knew to: he had no money, his job at the *Herald* didn't make enough to support a wife, he still lived with his parents, and he probably never would make any success as an author.

Then he'd come home and been offered a raise at the *Herald*—his editor, Teeb, said it had been a long time coming and at last they could afford it. Then his article series on

England had begun receiving public acclaim. Then he'd been offered two separate opportunities, to purchase a small house not far from his parents or rent an apartment in the city. He'd turned them both down, but the impression was clear: God was pointing out how badly he'd failed.

Tonight was just another slap to the face. He'd signed a contract with a publisher for *War of Brothers*. It was a good contract for a new author, and the book would come out early next year. If it did well, the publisher was interested in pursuing a future with him. He'd gone to their offices today and signed a great deal of paperwork that Riley assured him was all legitimate—not something he'd

dreamed up, but a real, honest-to-goodness contract with a real, honest-to-goodness publisher.

He was going to be a published author.

His family was gathered around, all thrilled for him, all celebrating, and he was being a wet blanket. Or at least he was being a wet blanket on the inside; in every way possible, he was trying to avoid that fact being visible from the exterior. He smiled and laughed and thanked his parents and siblings and friends over and over again and insisted it wasn't as important as it was. Inside, he felt like leaving, out the door, down the street—and just walking until some of the sadness wore off.

Perhaps it would. Generally, a long walk helped. However, Peter was avoiding the bigger issue, and he knew it. He should've been more receptive to God's leading. He should've allowed the option of a woman being in his life, if that was God's will. He'd allowed fear and past pain to guide his present, and now he'd lost that offered happiness once again. Though, this time it was more serious.

What he felt for Alice Knight had been different than what he had felt for Maddie. It was stronger and cleaner and less inclined to send him into fits of agony. However, that was the reason he treasured it. Her presence was a comfort, like a warm pair of slippers and a

good book and a roaring fire. Maddie was a bit more like a pair of heavy boots, a collection of Edgar Allan Poe, a fire burning outside the grate. Not in the way people usually meant when they described out of control things—she put him vaguely on edge and at times completely unnerved him.

In fact, the most attractive thing in the world, when one grew up and became sensible and yet thoroughly insensible, was steadiness. Boredom didn't enter his thoughts when it came to Alice Knight. Comfort wasn't boredom; happiness wasn't boredom. The thought of having Alice in his life *was* soothing, yes, but it was also exciting in the way only the most wonderful things can be.

How he wanted her! This was the way it ought to be—and he'd tossed it away because of prideful humility and stubborn faithlessness.

God, I'm so sorry I couldn't believe when it counted.

“Penn, a word.”

Before Peter knew what was happening, Riley had him by the arm and yanked him away from the parlor, where his family was sitting and chatting, and into the dining room.

“What in the name of all things joyful is wrong with you, Penn?” His best friend shut the door of the dining room, now empty and freshly clean, with a bang and turned to him, arms folded across his chest. “Ever since you came home from England, you’ve been stuck

in the doldrums. Tonight is worse than usual, too.”

Peter sighed. Of course Riley would pick up on his melancholy, even if he'd escaped notice by the rest of his family. “I'm tired.”

“And now you're lying?” Riley raised his eyebrows. “Did you get switched for your evil twin while you were in England?”

“I think my mother would've told me if I had an evil twin,” he murmured dryly. “Besides, it's not exactly a lie. I *am* tired.” Whenever he was sad, exhaustion was the primary symptom.

Riley's look said that Peter was being stubborn, and perhaps that was true. Peter *was*

a bit stubborn—more than most people seemed to know. Stubborn enough that, once he reached a place where he knew he must take a stand, or at least where he chose to take a stand, he wouldn't budge.

Stubborn enough to stand up to Alice Knight. He winced at the thought, and Riley rolled his eyes.

“Was it a woman or a friend or both?”

Peter grunted and pulled out one of the chairs. “We might as well sit if you're going to force me to tell the whole story.” That was generally where these discussions went. “It was a woman and a friend and both.”

Riley, too, took a seat at the table, opposite Peter. “So what happened? Who was

she?”

“The daughter of the Knights.” They’d both known Philip for several years after the war, and Riley had actually been the one who’d heard he’d moved back to England and, eventually, remarried.

His eyebrows shot up. “Philip Knight’s daughter? How old could she possibly be? Ten?” Riley smirked. “I’d think she’d be a little young for you.”

Peter scowled. She was young, but not *that* young. “She’s eighteen.”

“Hmm. Better than ten, I suppose.” Riley restlessly drummed his fingers along the table, an older and familiar habit that offered a rhythm for Peter’s hectic thoughts. “She’s

from his first marriage—or second, however you want to count it; what a delicious mess that family is.”

“Yes.” Though Peter had a few slight doubts about the origin of Miss Knight, he wouldn’t voice them aloud, and it didn’t much matter to him in terms of the woman she was now. “We met at her parents’ estate, and I ... I was attracted to her. She’s intelligent and brave, and there was always something interesting about her. A puzzle to be solved perhaps, though it was more than that. You know I would never give in to simple curiosity unless there was something deeper involved. All the same, I thought I ought to fight it, so I did, but eventually—” He stopped himself and

sighed. “I came to care for her. But a relationship was never on the table.”

Again, Riley’s expression was skeptical. Peter hated his *Oh, really? Is that so?* looks. Yet Riley chose to ignore Peter’s comment about the relationship and made the decision to pursue something a bit more interesting. “What’s she like? Describe her to me.”

Describe Alice Knight? That wasn’t at all fair. There weren’t words—and, frankly, ‘if he loved her less, he might be able to talk about *her* more,’ to modify a favorite quote from Jane Austen. Though, Peter supposed, Riley would be able to supply a fairly accurate description of just about any woman he’d ever met, so Peter might as well try. “She’s a bit

like Helen Graham from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Emma Woodhouse from *Emma* met and decided to create an amalgamation of themselves.”

Riley rolled his eyes. “I haven’t the slightest idea what that means, despite all your rambling.”

How to put her into words? He’d give a physical description. Riley cared about that type of thing, and it would be a good starting place. But she had indefinable qualities—everyone Peter truly liked did. Perhaps it was a human characteristic. “She’s tall, about my height, with dark hair and black eyes—they’re not quite black, but that’s where my *Tenant* reference comes in. Mrs. Graham has gray eyes

so dark that people call them black—that sounds fanciful, doesn't it?" Indeed, Riley was glaring him down again for being too imaginative. "But it's true. Yet if you tell her it, she'll say, 'Nonsense. They are just a very dark brown,' as if calling them dark gray is a personal insult. I suppose there might be flecks of brown, but I never stood close enough to tell. But I do know they are dark gray."

Riley cast his eyes toward the ceiling now. "What am I going to do with you, Penn? I ask you to tell me about a woman, generally, and you give me a sermon written to her eyes and leave the rest out. What sort of a girl is she? Shy, quiet? Your usual type?"

"Hardly." Shy and quiet were not

adjectives that ought to share the same space of air with Alice. “I do wish you’d read the books I recommend, Riley. You’d get a much clearer view of her. No, she’s not shy—she’s bold and a bit overloud and prideful and as full of bluster as any woman twice or three times her age who feels she knows and owns the world.”

Riley snorted. “Like my mother?”

“Yes, but not nearly so cold.” Oh, perhaps she was a bit cold, when she set her mind to it, but he didn’t feel that was her true self. “Maybe just as sure she’s right. But I see Christ in her, Riley—in every moment, in every day. I see her struggling with the same battles—and slightly different ones that still

feel familiar—as I have, and I see that she will learn to lean on Him. Already has, in many ways.” He didn’t have any doubts that Alice had had a bit of an awakening after the Gibson Ashfield fiasco. She had been so close to accepting the truths she needed to take her next step of faith—he believed she must have by now. Or at least he prayed so. “Besides, to quote *Tenant* again, ‘If she were more perfect, she would be less interesting.’”

“So she is a Christian? But not a very mature one.” Riley placed his hands flat on the table. “Is that what this is about? A kindred spirit? Or just a younger version of yourself?”

“She’s not very like me, though I suppose there are parts of her that are.” He

did feel her experiencing the same battles he had, but there was more to it than that. “I suppose you’re trying to say she’s a child, and I ought to let her grow up and leave her alone, but there are ways that she is more mature than me. And ways that we stand as equals. That’s not the problem.”

“Then what is, Penn? Why walk away?” Riley’s blue eyes, as always, had a steely quality when he finally arrived at a point. It was what made him a good lawyer—it was what made him a better friend.

“Because she didn’t want me.” He didn’t have to ask her to know that. “She was entering her first social season—she was presented to Queen Victoria—she had a very

specific idea of what her future husband would look like, and I doubt her parents would have seriously entertained the idea of allowing me to court her at any rate. But the simple fact is, I didn't stand a chance with her. So I was the best friend I could be—and I helped every way I could—and then I left.”

“Mmhmm ...” Riley leaned his chair back until it almost tipped beyond the point of no return, then snapped back upright. “So you didn't tell her. Let me guess—you slipped out without giving her a chance to say a proper good-bye and never told her a word about how you felt. You're running again.”

Peter grunted. Why did Riley know him so well? At times it was convenient, but, in the

moment, he just wanted to escape that pressure of his friend's eyes.

“Is this some part of Christianity you haven't told me about, perhaps? This deliberate self-torture? Because you follow it religiously.”

“It's not. I just knew—”

“You didn't give her a chance to tell you otherwise! Why do you devalue yourself, Penn?” His face turned almost angry. “You deserve so much better than this. I'm not joking; you do. Yet you refuse to try, to give a single woman the option of being courted by you. Have you ever thought that the women who hang about you like carrion crows aren't simply there to scavenge for kind words and

Bible verses? They might be looking to build a nest.”

Peter laughed at the imagery, shaking off the uncomfortable feeling that Riley was half-right. “I hope not. Half of the women I talk to are related to me or married to someone else—or far too old or young for me.”

“All the same, a fraction of them are not! Why, if you were to put on your Sunday best and go courting at the houses of half the women in our church, you’d be married in a week. But you won’t try.” Riley mumbled some unsavory words under his breath, or Peter assumed they were unsavory based on the expression on his face. Riley then deigned

to raise his voice to a hearable level. “You’re not humble at this point. You are a coward. So is any man who doesn’t come out and tell his intentions to a woman he’s interested in—and hang all this ‘I’m not ready.’ God doesn’t work with ready people, people who refuse to take a risk, people who wait for the perfect circumstances to align before every forward step—you’re the one who taught me that.”

Riley was right. Ridiculously right. Yet Peter couldn’t quite let himself admit it. Not yet. There was, indeed, a stubborn streak in him. It was quiet, yes, but a mile wide. “I’m largely uninterested in most of my carrion crows, too. I like them as friends but nothing more.”

“Don’t be flippant. Stop it.” Riley stood and ran his hands through his hair, standing it on end. He began to pace. “So you love her? Go ahead and just say it. It’ll do you good to say it aloud.”

“I know I love her.” Peter closed his eyes. “‘In a word, it was impossible for me to separate her, in the past or in the present, from the innermost life of my life.’ That’s another quote, but I’ve found it to be true.”

Riley waved *Great Expectations* off with a flip of his hand. “Right, right. Is she still unattached?”

“I don’t know. There was another man, but I don’t know if things will work out between them. When I left her, she’d made no

recent reference to him, but I believe she cared for him.” There was no evidence to indicate otherwise.

“But she’s likely not wed yet. Not so soon.” With that, Riley paused his pacing to withdraw his late brother’s watch and study the face fastidiously, as if that might tell him how Miss Knight’s impending nuptials were coming along.

Peter almost laughed.

No, she was not likely wed. Not unless she’d eloped. But Peter didn’t think she could be convinced to do so. No, not Alice. She’d have a church wedding or none at all.

“In which case, there is still a chance.” Riley shoved the watch back into his pocket

and whirled to Peter. “So, Penn, why don’t you do her the favor of asking? At least write her parents and ask for permission to pursue her, if you must be perfectly proper.”

Peter swallowed. He couldn’t do that. “But I don’t know—”

“You don’t know anything, Penn! That’s the point of a risk. So risk it. You wouldn’t have told me all this if you were altogether sure God had removed this option. You would have fought it harder and longer if you felt it wasn’t His will—I know you, and I’ve seen you do it. So fight for her, why don’t you?”

Peter took in a shaky breath. “You’re asking a lot from me.”

“I’m asking you to stand up and be a

man when it counts.” Riley smirked. “If you think that’s a lot, I don’t know what I shall ever do with you.”

Peter sighed. “Do I have a choice?”

“Oh, yes, you can make the right one or the wrong one.” Riley squinted in mock confusion. “Such a hard decision.”

“All right, all right. I’ll pray about it tonight.” Peter rose and held up his hands. “That’s all you’ll get out of me. A promise to pray. But ... you’ve given me a new perspective on this.” Already he felt that little tug in his soul—pray, pray, pray. *I know; I’m coming.*

He slipped out the back door and left his family to celebrate his publishing contract

without him, likely confused over his absence.
A long walk and a long talk were in order.

Chapter Twenty-Five

October 23, 1880

Pearlbelle Park

Kent, England

Alice took a sip of her tea and nibbled at her toast. She was never hungry in the morning, but she felt that tradition compelled her to at least make an effort. Besides, it gave her a few precious minutes each day to see each of her family members.

Even now, Mother and Papa were talking about hiring a tutor for Ned as he grew, or whether he ought to go to school—an

ongoing conversation but one Alice still found herself interested in. There was something about these boring, day-to-day matters that had fascinated her in the last few months. Normal suddenly had an appeal it never had before.

Ivy was trying to convince Caleb and Jackie to let her teach them to play the piano, and they were both moaning and groaning about how boring music was and how much they didn't want to be taught. Of course, in the end, Miss Fletcher would decide it was important for the boys to have a musical education, and Ivy would try until they exhausted her, and someone would have to give her permission to stop before she had a

breakdown. Alice would keep an eye on the situation.

The butler entered the room and approached Alice's chair. "Excuse me, Miss Knight. There's a package for you." Without further ceremony, he handed her a medium-sized parcel wrapped in brown paper and string.

Alice wasn't sure whether she should gawk at the package for the lack of postage or Mr. Marlin for not leaving it with the rest of the mail, so she alternated between the two.

Ivy stifled a giggle. Alice flicked her eyes toward her sister; the sound seemed without cause, and Ivy was now covering her mouth with her hand.

“Open it.” Mother badly hid a smile behind a cup of tea.

“Here, at the table?” Alice’s stare turned to her mother.

Mother turned to her left and helped Jackie pour his cream. “Mmhmm.”

“Very well.” Alice would see what the package was first, but she was going to have to question each of her family members afterwards. They were all acting strange.

“Here.” Case in point, Papa reached over Ned and passed her a small knife he just happened to be carrying. Why on earth would he have that? “Use this.”

Alice cut the strings and began ripping the paper off. She smiled at her family,

holding up a half-unwrapped book. “Someone really doesn’t know me well.” A novel was the last thing she’d want. This would be a good gift for Ivy, but it wasn’t something Alice would enjoy, certainly.

A few more giggles emerged from her younger siblings and a suppressed chuckle from Papa. There was nothing Alice hated more than being the butt of a joke she didn’t understand. Why must they torture her so? “Say, what’s going on here?”

Mother’s eyes seared up the table for a spare moment, allowing no further questions or other noises from anyone present, and everyone immediately went quiet. “Nothing, darling. Who’s the book by?”

“I do wish you’d let me in on the joke,” Alice said, returning her eyes to the book, which she’d barely glanced at before. She dropped it on her plate.

“Alice, you’ll ruin it!” cried Ivy, her voice conveying a mixture of horror and grief for the poor novel.

Alice picked it up, no worse for the wear despite her sister’s concern. “I can’t believe it,” she breathed.

For the title read *War of Brothers*, and the author was Peter W. Strauss.

“What is it, Alice?”

“It’s Peter Strauss’s book.” Alice flipped open the cover and ran her fingers over the title page. How sweet it must be for him to

have it in print. Though his choice to send it to her, and without a note from what she could tell, was strange.

“Why don’t you look at the dedication?” Caleb wiggled on his seat, his blue eyes wide and innocent—Alice didn’t believe it for a minute.

“The dedication? I suppose I could, if there is one.” Alice flipped a few pages in, glancing down each one. And then she sat still and couldn’t seem to breathe.

To Alice, for I know no other way to tell you.

The breath slowly returned to her lungs. She ran a finger over his signature

below the dedication and sighed.

Tell me what? Peter, where are you when I need a question answered? It's been too long since I've seen you, and now you send me this with a message like that. What does it mean? What do you want to tell me?

She raised her eyes to find her whole family staring at her. "It's dedicated to me." Was that why they were acting so oddly? They knew, somehow, that Peter Strauss had dedicated the novel to her, and it had them all excited. But without the man's presence, what good did it do? Her chest hurt, and her eyes were blurry, and it was all for nothing. For he could write her romantic notes, but unless he came here, to England, and saw her and asked

her to be his, it would mean nothing. Besides, the message was purposefully vague.

He'd never taken a risk before. Alice didn't believe he had taken one now. What did he think would happen? Her thoughts spiraled, and she needed some time to herself to sort them out. Maybe even to cry a little, unless she could manage some control over herself. She stood. "I ... I'm going to spend some time in my room."

"Very well, dearest." Mother didn't look up, and Alice fled the scene.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Peter stood outside the door of a small

cottage at the end of the drive and steeled his courage to knock. The October morning was chilly, and clouds swirled menacingly in the sky, but the bright autumn colors of the wood behind the gatehouse set it off, lending a cheery air to even the harshest wind gusts.

He raised his fist and knocked, once, twice, three times, and then lowered his hand and sighed. That much was gotten out of the way at least.

The door swung open, and he was greeted by a little girl with light curls and wide gray eyes. “Mr. Peter?”

“Hello, Ella. I’m here to see Nettie—your mother. Is she available at present?” He hoped so, for he wasn’t sure he’d have the

strength to come back later.

“Yes. I’ll fetch her.” She dashed away, leaving him standing in the doorway, unsure if he should enter the room or not. He heard her voice calling “Mama! Mama!” from inside.

In minutes, Nettie appeared, wearing a simple blue dress covered by a white apron, hair coming out of her casual chignon and eyes keen. “Mr. Strauss! Welcome to my home—come in! I must say, I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Peter,” he reminded her. “I’m surprised myself. I’ve only just arrived. May I speak with you privately?”

“Yes, of course.” A quick glance sent her daughter scattering. “My husband will be

here soon, if you'll stay long enough to meet him. I told Tom about you, and I think you'd like each other."

"I would like to meet him." But there was something he had to discuss that didn't require Tom Jameson's presence, though he wouldn't object to it, certainly.

She gestured for him to take a seat across from her at the kitchen table, and he did so, placing his sweaty palms flat on the legs of his trousers. The skittering pulse and thumping heart shouldn't be symptoms of such a normal conversation, but all day he'd been an absolute train wreck. Little things were causing him to shake.

"What is it you want to speak to me

about?”

He took a deep breath. “There’s a bit of a story attached, but simply put, I’d like to request your permission to ask Alice to marry me.”

She said nothing, her face expressionless for a long moment, then she smiled. “I’m not opposed, plainly. I’ve made no secret that I like you, Peter. But tell me the story—and tell me why you felt a need to speak with me first, too. Surely Claire and Mr. Knight are the better two candidates for the conversation.”

Peter decided to address the latter point first so he wouldn’t forget. “I felt strongly that Alice would never marry a man you

disapprove of. It's clear you love her as a mother"—and also clear to Peter that there was more to their relationship than met the eye, but he wouldn't say that aloud—"so I felt I could not truly commit myself to her until I'd been given your blessing. I have spoken with both Claire and Philip, but you know her better than anyone else. If you truly feel I would not be a good match for her, or if you truly feel God's will is absent here, I would seriously take your words under advisement."

He couldn't honestly say, much as he'd like to make that show of faith, that he would immediately drop his courtship of Alice if Nettie objected. However, if she had a legitimate reason, he'd be absolutely willing to

rethink it.

“I see. And the story?”

That was a great deal simpler. “I’m in love with her. Since the beginning, I’ve felt God leading me toward her. I left because I wasn’t willing to believe she would have any interest in me. However, a friend challenged me to stop running from God’s potential blessings. So I contacted the Knights, explained my circumstances—which are, by the way, greatly improved; I can take care of her—and, with their permission gained, took the next boat back to England. I’ll pursue her until she tells me to leave.”

“I see.” She laid her palms on the table then, a sign of acceptance as far as Peter could

tell. “I trust Claire and Mr. Knight to only accept if there were no objections, and I know you are a man of God. I don’t see any reason why I could possibly disapprove. In fact, I’d rather hoped she’d find a man like you all along. Do you feel a proposal may be sudden, though?”

He did feel so. However, they were different, as far as couples went. They had what he’d term a soul-deep connection, and Peter felt more and more certain that God would bring them together in the end. Still, he wouldn’t rush into it. “I want her to know I’m working toward marriage with her. I want her to know that, as far as I’m concerned, we can consider ourselves engaged. I think the

security will please her—I don't know if Alice could ever truly be happy if she wasn't offered something firm to work toward."

Nettie inclined her head in acknowledgement. "You're probably right there."

"All the same, I have agreed to wait at least until next summer, and I hope Alice will agree to this, too. I want to spend more time with her, as someone with clear intentions. I think she'll need time to plan, too, and we'll both need to grow toward each other—and toward Christ, of course. So it will be a long engagement if she accepts. I just can't stand not being sure of her any longer. Claire seemed to think Alice would accept." He

wasn't sure how much of that reassurance had been the Knights' eagerness to accept him into the family, however. Peter spoke calmly, but fears constantly overwhelmed him. What if she thought he was insane to have come across the ocean on a hope? What if she turned him down? What if it was all for naught?

But it would be worth it. To hear the truth, whatever it was, from her lips. To have finally pushed fears and doubts aside and to step boldly forward, whatever the outcome. He felt certain he was acting under God's will.

"That sounds perfect." Nettie's voice recalled him to the present, and he raised his eyes to her face. She looked close to tears.

“Make me one last promise, then, and you will have my blessing: love her second only to Christ.”

Solemnly, Peter nodded. “I will.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Alice would have happily sequestered herself in her room for the rest of the day, but Ivy sought her out just a few hours after she'd disappeared. At first, Alice denied her entrance, needing more time to think. She'd been pouring over Peter's book for any clue as to what he meant. There must be a romantic intention there! She hoped there was. But what good did it do when he was far away in

America and she in England?

She wanted him to come for her, but she doubted he would. Why would he? He had a life in America, and, even if he wanted to, he could hardly just travel across the Atlantic on a whim. More than that, she knew he wouldn't. He wasn't the type of man who took risks. He'd told her as much; last time he'd been in love, he'd not even told the woman.

Had he written Maddie cryptic notes, too?

Men accused women of being vague; however, Alice had found the opposite to be true. Besides a scattering of scoundrels and ne'er-do-wells, men refused to take a risk until they were absolutely sure their pride would

not be injured. Since the man was, traditionally, the one who ought to be doing the pursuing in a relationship, this was troubling. Yes, perhaps not all men struggled in this way, but Peter Strauss did, and he was the one she wanted.

If only he would come, throw caution to the wind, and ask her to be his. He couldn't be cold-hearted toward her. The dedication proved that. But would he ever give her a chance to share the simple fact that she wanted him?

Ivy's rap on the door was nothing if not persistent, unusual for her sister. "Alice, please. There's something I need to speak with you about. Could we go for a walk in the

garden? It's rather a nice day for October."

Though she wanted nothing more than to finish that book, Alice supposed it would have to wait until later. It was clear that Ivy had something pressing on her mind, pressing enough that she would willingly submit herself to the cold. Ivy didn't much like the cold. "Very well."

In the garden, the air was starting to cool to an uncomfortable level, and Alice clutched her coat close as she walked, arm linked with Ivy's. Clouds swirled in the dimming sky, and Alice took a deep breath, hoping it wouldn't begin to rain before they got back inside. Her sister remained silent as they left the terrace behind and walked down

the path, and it gave Alice even more time to think.

The fresh, sharp, leaf-tinged air was nice. Clarifying. She would survive, no matter the outcome of her relationship with Peter Strauss. The veil of uncertainty hung still, obscuring the next step for her, but she felt peace in God. He would help her find a future.

Ivy squeezed Alice's arm. "I love you, dearest, and I'm so happy that ... I mean, I will always be happy if you are."

"Oh?" What a strange thing to say. "I suppose I shall be happy if you are, too." Whatever Ivy's future looked like, her contentment was important to Alice. Even if there was nothing Alice could particularly do

about it.

Ivy's eyes grew troubled. "I hope you'll forgive me for not being honest about why I wanted to bring you out here." Then she smiled, softly. "But I believe you will."

What? Alice turned to question this, but then they strolled around the corner, and Ivy drew away, disappearing back toward the house. Alice barely noticed; she stood still, not breathing. In fact, she might never breathe again. She didn't mind terribly.

For there, standing next to a bench by the fountain, was Mr. Peter Strauss himself, hat in hand, smiling, looking at her as if he could never tire of it. Alice found that she never wanted to stop looking, either.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Peter swallowed and took a hesitant step forward before pausing, afraid to trust the look in her eyes, knowing he couldn't assume something where there was nothing. As her sister practically ran away, leaving them their privacy in the cloudy garden, Alice walked slowly toward him, her eyes never leaving his face. When she was within a yard, she stopped.

“Peter?” Her voice was soft and low but flavored with confusion and perhaps a bit of excitement, unless he was dreaming it.

That was when he realized this wasn't a

dream, and still he hadn't talked. *At all.*

But all he could manage was, "Alice," so he said it—three times, one after the other. He wished he wasn't feeling so tongue-tied and that he was the kind of a man who could put words together with his mouth rather than with his pen. Which he could, on occasion, but not when it mattered. About religion and emotions and abstract theology—never when it was vital for him to speak, to breathe life into expectations, to create a future based on a few simple words.

Too much was at stake. He should have just written. It would have been easier to write. He could have said fantastic things if he'd written. He could have told her what he

thought of her—and it all would have come out clearly and beautifully.

No. Stop. No more allowing fear to rule his choice. That was the coward's way out. He squared his shoulders.

“Won’t you sit down?” *Weak.* But he really felt like she ought to be sitting down. That way she wouldn’t tower over him when he—

This was possibly the hardest thing he’d ever done.

At least she was cooperative. She took a seat on the bench, her eyes still on his face. For some reason, instead of making it harder, it made it easier. He saw something in her eyes that made his heart leap and bound and

shout, and he wanted to tell her a million things all at once.

“I-I know I’m not exactly Fitzwilliam Darcy—or Mr. Knightley, more like. I’m not a knight in shining armor. I’m probably not someone who you ever imagined would approach you, and I must believe you’re confused and perhaps a bit disgusted. But you must know that, small man that I am, I still felt it unwise to not at least tell you the truth.”

He realized an instant after the words were out that they were weak and self-deprecating. What must she respond to that, if only in her own mind? *Certainly—therefore, I’m not interested in you.* Such a poor beginning; did he want to convince her not to marry him?

He should give up. He should definitely give up. It wasn't worth it.

Oh yes it is.

“You must know I'd work for you as I've never worked for anything else in my life.”

Weak, weak, weak.

“And we would have a home, you see.” Should he get down on one knee? This didn't really feel like knee-worthy material. Perhaps he should, though. It was the way things were supposed to be.

“In Philadelphia,” he added. That might need clarifying. “That's where I'd want to live.” Would that bother her? She seemed so loyal to England. “But we wouldn't have to,”

he hastened to say, despite the fact that he so badly wanted to live near his parents. “We ... we could live in England. I realize your whole family is here. I could work in Kent as easily as anywhere. And I’d work hard, Alice. I’d try to be worthy of you, and that’s all a man can do, honestly.”

If only she would give him something to work off of. But she was waiting. Then Peter knew why—because he had told her his fears, his weaknesses. Because she was giving him the chance to stand up for himself. That gave him some courage, yes, but still, he jabbered like a silly jay.

“The book is selling well. Everyone’s talking about it. They really like it. I also have

had a raise at my job, and, overall, it's not a bad situation. Certainly I could support a wife and ... and children, but—" He gestured around him. "Not like this. Never like this. All the same, there's a great deal to be said for poverty. Not that we'd be poor exactly, but we'd certainly be *less* rich. I don't think it would matter, because I ... I can't imagine a better life than with you by my side." The words came out in a rush. There. That was better.

A soft light entered her eyes, and a bit of a smile tugged at her lips.

"I can't imagine that I'd want anything more if I could only have *you*." He could explain that. "God is in this, Alice. If you don't

feel it, I'll understand, but He told me to pursue you, and so I will. I'll pursue you until you tell me to leave, and if you do, I can't promise I won't stay around and write poetry and mope. Maybe not *mope*, but I don't know quite what I'd do, because the command was so certain. I don't have a next step. But I will always follow God's will to the best of my ability, and right now, He has guided me to you and given me this gift of love and asked me to take care of you. How can I say no, Alice? How can I—?”

“Peter, if you don't stop talking, I'm going to have to kiss you.”

He took a deep breath and swallowed hard. As he stood there watching her, he

found that he desperately wanted to keep talking—and yet he was speechless. Of course the babblings would stop as soon as they were convenient for his purposes. Just his luck.

Alice stood and put her hands on his shoulders, then slid one up to cup his cheek. “Peter,” she whispered, like his name was the most beautiful thing she’d ever heard. “Peter, *my* Peter.”

“I love you,” he murmured.

“Peter, I told you to stop talking.”

Epilogue

There was a knock at her door—a quiet, unassuming knock. The children were playing at the mansion, and Tom was gone for the day. As always, when someone unknown arrived at her haven of rest, Nettie felt a chill slide down her spine, but she dismissed it as silly nonsense.

The fact of her fears being silly was confirmed when she opened the door to find a woman standing there—tall and lovely, yes, with green eyes and reddish-brown hair swept up at the nape of her long neck, but certainly not intimidating.

“Mrs. Jameson? I am Mrs. Manning. I wonder if I might come in?”

Nettie nodded. “Of course! I remember your boy well.” She gestured in. “Shall I make —”

“No tea, please. I shan’t be long.” She stepped into Nettie’s kitchen but rejected the proffered seat at the table with a slight shake of her head. “I only came to ask if my suspicions are true. Is Miss Alice Knight the daughter of Steven Parker?”

Nettie stood still, her heart pounding at the back of her throat and in her stomach and at the tips of her fingers and toes—everywhere, practically, but in the yawning cavern of her empty chest. “What would lead

you to have such a suspicion?”

“It has been a long-held suspicion, Mrs. Jameson. However, the expression on your face is confirmation enough that it is true.” She drew in a harsh breath and let it out as a small, almost hysterical laugh. “You needn’t fear any action from me. I am not here to pry out information or to bribe. Only to be sure I did not make a mistake. I would never betray the truth—after all, I bore one of his cast-offs, too.”

Nettie’s throat tightened. She’d wondered sometimes if there wasn’t something strange about the way the Mannings were kept on estate property, the way their needs were seen to by the household, and perhaps there

had been moments when she'd seen that man in Kirk. However, she'd never followed the thoughts—never felt it was important to worry about it when the family was safe and seemed out of his grasp.

Yet she was not surprised. Not in the slightest.

Mrs. Manning seemed to deflate a bit after saying these words. "I shall have to trust you won't say anything, too, I suppose. I was his ... No, I wasn't anything to him. But he made me believe I might be, and he was a class or two above me, and handsome and young then—I was a fool. Then Kirk was coming, and I left London—and he at least had the decency to make sure I was fed. Then Jim

—that’s Mr. Manning—came along and took pity on me. He was just a cripple ...” Her voice trailed off. “I suppose I don’t need to tell you any of this. Kirk didn’t know until recently, but I had to tell him.”

Ah. That explained a lot. “Because he had formed an attachment to Alice,” Nettie breathed.

“Yes, and I thought he was likely her half-brother. However, I wouldn’t let him tell her, no matter how much he wanted to. I wanted Kirk to believe he had every right to the name Manning—I married Jim, though I barely knew him, to give him that right. I couldn’t stand for it to go to waste.” Mrs. Manning closed her eyes. “Now he is angry at

me, but I did what I had to for my son. Surely he can see that—that I would die for him, gladly, but this was what living for him looked like. I should've known this would come back to me. It's all my fault in the first place.”

Nettie stifled a whimper, perhaps of sympathy or recognition. She knew the feeling well. *It was my fault. I should have ... I should have ... I should have ...*

She cleared her throat, determined not to let another woman go without another reminder that *shoulds* never helped, and often they were unwarranted. “It may not be entirely your fault. After all, Mr. Parker—”

The lady held up her hand. “No. I went to him willingly. Granted, he coaxed and

pressed, but, in the end, the decision was mine. I could have stopped him.”

Bubbles of emotion popped dangerously near the surface, and Nettie closed her eyes, breathed in and out, repeated unspoken mantras of years past until the panic eased. Always the same routine. Yet the truth must triumph here—and later elsewhere.

For now, she whispered, “It may be true, in part, that you were equally to blame. But I would offer a simple consolation, though perhaps not a very comforting one. If he wanted you, he was going to have you, one way or another. I know the man well enough to tell you that. You say you could have stopped him; I say you could not have.”

Mrs. Manning scoffed and turned toward the door.

Nettie summoned her courage and murmured, "I know because I could not."

In the door, the woman paused, her hand bracing against the doorway. "I am sorry. I didn't know it was like that."

Nettie ducked her chin and focused on the breaths again, the controlled emotions, the lie of composure when her heart and mind rebelled.

"Yet here you are, and here I am. In the end, he could not stop our lives, could he?" Mrs. Manning's head raised, and Nettie could see the strength entering her again. "Even if we must live a lie to obtain our lives, is it

really so bad?”

Despite in some ways understanding, it appeared Mrs. Manning's experience had been slightly different, for the agony of soul Nettie had experienced was 'really so bad.' Yet she forced out a soft, “Yes,” and let the other woman leave.

And she knew, deep in her soul, that she could not live the lie much longer. Sooner or later, and perhaps sooner, it would all come out.

A Note to the Reader

This book has been a long time in the making, and it's finally here, and I can't believe I get to share it with people. For years, I've imagined what Peter and Alice's love story would be like, and I can't believe it's in print. They're pretty much my favorite couple. I wouldn't have an Alice at all if it weren't for Peter popping into a story way back when I was twelve and making me fall in love with him!

Thank you so much for reading. It's truly the readers who bring a story to life, and I'm thankful to you for giving my characters a

chance.

I would like to note a couple small things:

First, I did a lot of research to make the London Season and all associated events come to life. I particularly had fun learning about the Royal Academy of Arts and the Epsom Derby. Both of these happened as described in 1880. I will note that I wasn't sure of the exact date that the Royal Academy of Arts opened in 1880, but I approximated based on the information available to me. The Epsom Derby, however, is as accurate as I can make it save for the fact that there was no horse named Gilded Star on that field of nineteen.

Second, I tried my best to have my

characters stay true the feelings of the time while *also* portraying varying perspectives on all issues represented while *also* allowing truth to shine through. It's a tricky balance, a line every historical author walks tremulously. Where I could, I made historical accuracy my first priority—but there are doubtless places where my more modern sensibilities slipped in. I apologize for those blindspots. I put a lot of research into this book, but I know there will be places I made mistakes. Point them out in your reviews, and maybe I won't make them again ... and you'll keep other readers from being fooled, too!

Or, if you just want to leave a review talking about what you liked about the book, I

won't protest to that decision, either.

If you want to get in contact, try checking out my website:

<https://kellynrothauthor.com/>

You can also find me on Instagram, Facebook, Goodreads, BookBub, and a number of other websites. I'd love to connect!

All that said, I just want to say that you, my friend, are loved and known by God. He has a plan; He isn't just messing up there on a cloud and letting the world fall to shambles around you. Trust Him.

God keep you all!

Kellyn Roth

July 2021

The Dalles, Oregon

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I'm not going to remember everyone, and that's just a fact. There are so many people that go into the making of a novel.

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To my many beta-readers, who gave me a ridiculous amount of feedback on Kirk's presence at the Derby (was he really there or

not?) ...

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To my formatter, Cara Devereux, who swooped in like an angel to help me get this book ready for printing ...

To my niece, who thinks all my books are boring. Thanks, darling. I also killed Batman, just so you know.

Basically, if you're reading this and need a 'thank you,' you probably know it. I'm thankful for each and every one of you.

All my love,

Kell

About the Author

Kellyn Roth is a Christian historical women's fiction & romance author from North-Eastern Oregon who adores border collies, lilacs, and Keira Knightley. She's been writing since she was seven, published since she was fifteen, and absolutely in love with Dairy Queen french fries and Dr. Pepper since birth.

Other than writing, Kellyn loves messing around on Instagram, chatting with her friends, watching old movies, playing and listening to music, mentoring children, and spending time with her husband, Matthew.

Interested in following her journey? Check out

...

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